

## Chapter V: *Grogneurs* in Changing Media Environments

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### *Grogneurs* in Bénin: Comparative Aspects

With my interventions during the *grogne* shows, I hope to fill some gaps, those of the radio news, which under-report our current problems. After heavy rains, the city turns into a small swamp, for example. All the craftsmen, traders, and businessmen have to cope with these miserable conditions, yet news cover only parts of this. And whenever I see the big holes in the middle of the main roads, I **must** say something. (Sébastien Gnonhossou, Cotonou, October 2021)

Apparent differences exist between the three major areas of investigation, regarding the activities of *grogneurs* and their standing within the local media landscape. The greater region around Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and the southern part of the country differs from the northern region in terms of population density, economic power, and infrastructure. Here, we also find a vast number of radio stations broadcasting in several languages. Consequently, there are many more *grogneurs* because the number of *grogne* shows is considerably higher. In the wider Cotonou–Porto-Novo area, *grogneurs* also display a much broader set of activities that range from calling in on various shows (e.g. quiz shows) to public appearances at radio studios and public events.

In Parakou, numerous *grogneurs* (there, they are usually called *faiseurs d'opinion* or *leaders d'opinion* – i.e. opinion leaders) are highly active, as they call in to the four major shows in French and those in local languages. Some of them are organised in associations (see below), but unlike many *grogneurs* in the Cotonou area, few of them expose themselves by accepting invitations to public studio meetings. Furthermore, most of the subjects of their interven-

tions chiefly refer to local, municipal issues but do not tackle larger political debates and national policies in general (with notable exceptions).

In Natitingou, a provincial town in northwestern Bénin, the number of *grogne* shows is even more limited, including those aired by the supra-regional state broadcaster Radio Parakou. The municipal radio station Radio Nanto FM in Natitingou provides such programmes in French and Dendi only twice per week. *Grogneurs* there are mainly welders, shop owners, barbers, tailors, and mechanics. Many are socially active, for example, the photographer and passionate caller René Leha, the chairman of the photographers' association in the city (who is now deceased), and the tailor Ibrahim Ouorou, who became the head of the city district Santa in 2025 (see below, 115).

Conversely, proximity relations allow *grogneurs* to know each other quite well and be even more closely tied to each other than elsewhere. In Natitingou, recurrent topics have included dirty neighbourhoods, road accidents, and an insufficient water supply, as well as, above all, poor roads within the city centre. Furthermore, callers often address the issues of the town's central market (e.g. in its former state, with insufficient space and less-organised booths, and later, when a new market was erected due to apparent problems with its organisation).

In Natitingou, according to both journalists and frequent callers, the number of those intervening in *grogne* shows is low (a sharp contrast to both Parakou and Cotonou). Moreover, listeners often argue that in Natitingou, they do not want to expose themselves to avoid criticism of their command in French or Dendi, as well as to avoid further questioning. Furthermore, the time slots in the programming schedule do not always align with the listening habits of many.

Nonetheless, the people in Natitingou have their worries, but they are more hesitant to expose these publicly. Listeners frequently call in to other interactive shows, such as quiz and request shows. Here, past experiments had discouraging effects, for example, the arrest of some people in 2011 due to political troubles. In those days, inter-ethnic tensions mounted, including tension with the police, who intervened quite rigorously. Thus, political talk shows and *grogne* programmes were generally suspended for a while (Grätz 2014b: 294).

Several times in Natitingou, *grogneurs* were intimidated or even overtly accused of 'intoxication'<sup>1</sup>. These threats led to fewer *grogneur* interventions on the

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1 The term *intoxication* (poisoning) in the Béninese context hints at the potential abuses of media power: above all, the spreading of fake news to influence political debates.

air, as well as the critical content they issued. Thus, in Natitingou, the open or hidden pressure on journalists to be prudent in allowing critical statements is ever-present, so journalists often shy away from accepting the *grogneurs'* clear statements. Only in a few cases have callers stood firm in their statements and positions with media authorities and the police.

The head of the district (*chef de quartier*) in Santa, Natitingou, Ibrahim Ouorou, is a notable example. In 2011, he witnessed ballot rigging during the presidential election and spoke about his observations on the air. Suddenly, police officers appeared in his workshop and tried to arrest him. He was saved thanks to the protection of neighbours and colleagues. This experience, however, did not frighten him but convinced him even more to continue his stance. Indeed, not all *grogneurs* in the Natitingou area would react in the same way. Ibrahim explained his fearlessness as follows:

'In fact, I have nothing to lose. I have no further stakes in whatever public matters, and do not owe anybody anything. I am only accountable to the truth, and the best development of my neighbourhood and the general interest of all' (Natitingou, August 2023).

## Strategies for Procuring Information

How do the *grogneurs* acquire their information? First, most *grogneurs* are particularly open-minded people who are critical of public life. Many can also rely on specialised knowledge gained through their professions or education (e.g. the study of law), a current or former position in a particular NGO, or an association or authority. *Grogneurs* often follow media and public debates more intensively than others do, but regarding particular sensitive issues, they develop useful strategies to access data and identify potential sources. They draw on personal connections with people from diverse backgrounds, so they maintain relationships with a wide range of potential informants (e.g. knowledgeable employees or whistleblowers in administrative institutions and companies who disagree with management decisions but do not want to expose themselves).

The *grogneurs* either receive information via phone, as their mobile phone numbers are easily passed on, or by intermediaries who hand over or transfer documents. Sometimes, they are simply contacted at home or at their workplaces. Most knowledge the *grogneurs* have about sensitive facts is not derived

from official information or social media; it comes from personal contacts. Under these circumstances, they discuss whether they can assist visitors in accessing this information.

Many *grogneurs* are well known in their respective neighbourhoods. Especially those who work as craftsmen and run workshops, as well as owners of kiosks, shops, bars, and restaurants, are publicly present and well known. We already know Sébastien Gnonhossou, who operates from his small workshop in Missèbo, a central area of Cotonou characterised by the strong presence of traders and their second-hand cloth market. Here, he works closely with various people who commission him with small and large projects. Repeatedly, people ask Sébastien to express their individual concerns on the air, such as a man who had bad experiences at the office of civil registration, where his files were significantly delayed, and persons from a private enterprise who were not correctly paid for public road construction in the Borgou area. Both provided Sébastien copies of the respective contracts and receipts (Cotonou, April 2025).

This issue highlights the role of *grogneurs* as intermediaries. People facing serious problems often assume that a well-known *grogneur* is better placed to publicise their claims and raise awareness by intervening on their behalf. They may charge *grogneurs* to address common concerns of larger groups (e.g. pensioners, state agents, and contractors), as well as in individual cases of conflict where they do not see other ways that can work. Discussing such an issue indeed exerts moral pressure on defendants, which has often led to appeasement. *Grogneurs* like Sébastien are provided with information by others to make issues public in a concise manner. However, their reputation and their intermediary role do not necessarily have to be associated with calls. They can also offer general assistance.

On 12 August 2022, an older man visited Sébastien's workshop. He asked Sébastien to mediate in a complex affair of disputed heritage. The man presented relevant documents, which Sébastien read carefully before offering advice the next day. Sébastien had to manage a kind of succession court case after his father's death, who left some goods and real estate. Meanwhile, Sébastien was well informed about all necessary documents, potential ways of mediation, and the settlement of disputes.

In other cases, *grogneurs* may act on their own behalf and that of their fellows. For example, in November 2022, Sébastien mentioned the issue of unpaid allowances for artisans several times during his calls to *grogne* shows. These allowances were promised during the COVID-19 crisis in early 2021 to alleviate the situation of artisans who had lost clients. Sébastien remarked that some

artisans had received such sums, but most had not (including himself), information he obtained from regularly visiting artisans' meetings. He claimed that he was entitled to receive his share as well since he previously filed the necessary documents.

On 18 October 2021, the aforementioned *grogneur*, Adam Bachirou, was visited by two acquaintances who had a problem with unpaid wages from a security company in Parakou. They finished on time but were still owed three months' salaries. Adam Bachirou decided to publicise the problem on a radio station. He suggested the private radio stations Arzèkè FM and Fraternité FM, while recommending that only the company and the problem should be mentioned, not individual responsibility, to avoid accusations of individual defamation. Before going on the air, Adam sent an extract from a payment order via WhatsApp to the journalists of the two stations. The order, which did not account for the corresponding months, served as evidence regarding one of the individuals involved. He then noted the key points and prepared a template for his calls the next morning (my observation).

Mohamed Boro is an active *grogneur* within the Parakou media landscape, known for the recurrent thematic focus of his interventions on concrete societal grievances. Illustrating the latter point, Boro successfully drew attention to the issue of non-payment or insufficient remuneration of freelance contractual employees engaged in local vaccination campaigns during 2021. The initial impetus for this exposé stemmed from the report of an affected next of kin, which prompted Boro to conduct further empirical inquiry among other implicated individuals. By collecting this information, he was subsequently able to articulate the specific grievance within various radio programs, thereby transforming anecdotal evidence into a public discourse topic (Parakou, August 2022).

Direct informal contacts with fellow residents are certainly the most important sources of information for the *grogneurs*. However, their importance is difficult to assess within the empirical framework of this study, as trust, anonymity, and hidden interactions prevail. *Grogneurs* do not name their personal informants in public to protect them and preserve the private framework of these contacts, even if they must procure some tangible proof to substantiate their statements on the air. Some dynamic *grogneurs* (in terms of the time used for both inquiries and the preparation of their statements) try to capitalise on particular relationships with people in larger enterprises, such as the port, markets, and the police.

The well-known *grogneur*, Roland Gbemana, for example, maintains very close relationships with some police officers, especially in Abomey-Calavi and certain western districts of Cotonou. Police officers often convey firsthand information to him about recent events, criminal acts, and the apprehension of suspects, whereas Gbemana helps report on their successful activities as often as possible on the radio (and simultaneously on WhatsApp). I consider this exchange to be mutually profitable, as the police are interested in bettering their image in society, while Gbemana continues to rely on firsthand information to support his statements on the radio. Once, Gbemana boasted of being the instigator of police investigations, which led to the detention of criminals in Akpakpa (interviews in October 2018 and 2021, Cotonou).

Inquiring further into sensitive issues, *grogneurs* often face, however, similar difficulties to those faced by journalists. Authorities often refuse to provide ample information or use excuses:

Authorities often say that the case is in the hands of the judiciary. This is how they silence us. You do not have the right to talk about a case that is before the courts. (Abdul Razack Bokossa, Cotonou, December 2023)

Various *grogneurs* have established the habit of visiting the meeting points of motor-taxi drivers (*zémidjan* or *kèkènon*), where all kinds of information, including rumours, are shared. Here, there are some nodal points or 'hot spots' of debate. I already mentioned the former newsstand, *Kiosk de la morgue*, which has also served as a resting place for motor taxi drivers in the heart of Cotonou, behind the morgue of the general hospital (*Centre National Hospitalier Universitaire Hubert K. Maga*)<sup>2</sup>. Journalists, politicians, state employees, and *grogneurs* frequently stopped over and exchanged opinions, often passionately. Several *grogneurs* have capitalised on a morning visit to the place to 'update' their information or to make comments to journalists recording street opinions for local radio or (internet) TV broadcasters<sup>3</sup>.

Once, I accompanied the frequent caller Anselme Kpindjo, the owner of a motorcycle repair shop in Cotonou-Gbégamey, to a *zémidjan* meeting point on

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2 Those places, typical for West African metropolises, are considered to be 'street parliaments', where open discussions are led by self-declared political commentators of news headlines (i.e. *titrologues*), see Banégas (2012).

3 Radio Soleil has regularly aired parts of its weekday press review, *Les titres en débat*, live on the air from this kiosk. However, it was demolished due to construction.

a side street on several occasions. There was a bustling street café on weekdays that also served as a venue for lively political discussions. We also met at a busy cook shop in Cotonou–Gbégaméy run by his wife, where we often discussed many topical issues with listeners (December 2024).

Nevertheless, numerous other circuits exist where information is shared in urban contexts. A *grogneur* may receive information indirectly, relayed from a friend via channels like WhatsApp. Alternatively, a *grogneur* may obtain a note when fuelling a motorbike, strolling around in his neighbourhood, when visiting a bar with friends, or during a funeral of a relative who attended a meeting of a local association or worship the day before. *Grogneurs* then check the given information by soliciting others, making phone calls, or requesting relevant documents.

This attitude is similar to the work of journalists. Some sayings in their reports on the air, such as ‘according to my investigations’, align with journalistic rhetoric (2012a). Nevertheless, *grogneurs* generally play with such roles and identities and introduce themselves rather as ‘speakers of the people’. They demarcate clear lines to journalists and stress their own frankness and positions as being ‘closer to the facts’.

Many *grogneurs* note that they prefer relying on their own experiences: ‘I prefer talking about something I myself have noticed,’ emphasised One-Two, a *grogneur* in Natitingou (August 2024).

The majority of *grogneurs* emphasised the differences between them and the radio journalists and pointed to their greater courage to expose themselves. Sébastien said it this way:

We know what we’re doing. People know us. Of course, I can also get into trouble with the judiciary. But the journalists are taking a bigger risk. Many of them are also afraid to express themselves freely. (Cotonou, November 2021)

Even if he may have overstated the difference, Sébastien’s statement nevertheless points to clear discrepancies in the self-image between the two types of actors.

## Social Media and Opinion-Making in Bénin Today

WhatsApp is now the most important messenger service in Bénin. It contributes to the rapidity of information flows within the country and beyond, while helping both journalists and citizens to network and stay up-to-date with the latest news. Conversely, many rumours have circulated in Bénin in the recent past via WhatsApp. As it is easy in Benin to join one of its numerous forums, the service functions like a social network. Currently, many people in Bénin join the ubiquitous slogan '*C'est une information WhatsApp*' (it is WhatsApp information) when referring to something unreliable. However, these issues do not hinder individuals from subscribing to groups of interest or forums, or from reading and forwarding news content of any sort, perhaps partly due to a kind of playful appropriation of such content. In any case, this approach considerably impacts the circulation of information and will continue to do so.

Usually, official documents from governmental institutions or tribunals circulate quickly across WhatsApp or Facebook. The advantage is that these 'leaks' help to clarify certain facts, such as the processes by which decisions are made and justified and how the bureaucratic apparatus operates. While these leaked documents may contribute to higher public transparency, they may also be falsified. Thus, the posting of such documents without providing additional information about their actual context may be misleading or even unsafe.

Most *grogneurs* extensively use WhatsApp to stay updated and, above all, to communicate with informants and friends, such as Razack Bokossa,

I created a WhatsApp group. So, if someone has worries or something is happening in a certain place, they inform me, and I also go on-site and do my investigations. (Cotonou, December 2023)

Nevertheless, they are quite hesitant to use information received by WhatsApp for direct, unverified interventions during one of the *grogne* shows. For example, Sébastien declared,

It is quite risky to use any such information from WhatsApp to make up a phone call. It could be false, and even with your own investigation to verify such issues, you might not be aware of all dimensions involved. It could be a trap. (Cotonou, August 2025)

Sébastien also stated that he had stepped down from his position as an administrator of WhatsApp groups to avoid potential legal problems related to disinformation shared by members.

Furthermore, I argue that the position of *grogneurs* has not been questioned with the boom of social media in the country. Social media and messenger services, including WhatsApp, have considerably altered *grogneurs'* strategies of both information procurement and verification. These services help the *grogneurs* communicate more easily and quickly with their informants, as well as with fellow *grogneurs*. Consequently, they may utilise more options to verify sensitive information before they talk on the air. Furthermore, these media help to spread their interventions more widely, when, for example, audio files of their calls can be easily shared with many other users, especially those who have no time to listen live, or those living outside the FM range of a radio station (for other West African countries, see Avle 2015; Assogba/Koulete 2022).

Conversely, social media enables the more immediate and rapid dissemination of information in a simplified manner. However, it can also pose a challenge to the activities of the *grogneurs*, who extensively use social media and messenger services to network and verify or check information. Conversely, they are reluctant to use short messages from these sources without further inquiry to avoid the spread of fake news, which can damage their reputation and could be legally problematic. The flow of news from social media has certainly made the *grogneurs'* statements less immediate and instantaneous. I argue, nevertheless, that it has helped maintain the position of the *grogneurs* as trustworthy individuals in the face of uncertain information flows on social networks.

Consequently, the *grogneurs* have adapted to this situation by no longer focusing on immediate events, including accidents, traffic jams, and other 'breaking news'. Instead, they prefer discussing more permanently relevant issues and have more time to examine any formation on these matters more thoroughly.

For example, the death of the head of the independent, well-established Christian community *Église du Christianisme Céleste* was speculated about in WhatsApp forums at the end of 2023. However, to my knowledge, no one spoke about it on call-in radio broadcasts. In other cases, reference is made to topics on social networks, but in an enlightening gesture, several *grogneurs* have noted that these rumours should not be believed (e.g. a supposedly planned complete shutdown of the country at the beginning of 2021).

Nonetheless, social networks are used as a means of communication to check facts, request evidence (e.g. photos), and generally communicate with other *grogneurs*. As a side effect, fake news is perhaps a current, relevant problem for social media, but not for *grogne* shows anymore. Therefore, social media has diversified the communication affordances of all people in the country while not hampering the relevance of *grogneurs* because the latter consequently affirm their trustworthiness and veracity.

### Everyday Relationships Between *Grogneurs* and Journalists

On 5 November 2022, a group discussion occurred in Cotonou-Akpakpa with two journalists from CAPP FM and several *grogneurs*. Barnabé Agbekponou, Emmanuel Avlessi, Llamidi Koumagnon, Nicaise Atchadé, Sébastien Gnonhossou, and Kantchenou discussed their motives and issues. The host of *grogne* programmes and the interactive show *Tribune libre*, Philibert Abibou, helped organise the encounter.

We were sitting together in a noisy and rumbling bar at the former Cinema Concorde after ordering soft drinks. The atmosphere was casual: the place resembled a train station, yet it was outside a radio station, so it was considered ‘neutral’. These *grogneurs* were boasting about their activities and recounting current issues raised during their calls. Throughout our discussions, they complained about some broadcasters’ reluctance to allow broader debates on the air while discussing the widely differing responses of authorities to their calls.

During the discussion, Koumagnon took a dominant role and advocated for a more forthright style of speech. In contrast, others, including Sébastien, were more reserved and argued in favour of well-elaborated words. Some *grogneurs* urged Abibou to more clearly address *grogneurs*’ issues, including critiques of the government. Abibou referred to his position as a journalist, including the limits that had to be observed: ‘I would not only risk my position but also jeopardise the entire radio station’, he explained. The meeting concluded with mutual encouragement to continue calling, with applause for the journalist.

Indeed, relationships between *grogneurs* and journalists are ambivalent. At more than one moment, I encountered journalists who displayed a certain disapproval towards the *grogneurs*. They claimed that the *grogneurs* were often not well situated in the topics they addressed and simply enjoyed talking. Some hosts pointed to the *grogneurs*’ sometimes maladroit modes of expression. Oth-

ers mentioned this issue negatively, especially concerning those callers who stirred up critical debates but were not well equipped to master the subject matter. An experienced journalist from CAPP FM, Lucien Dossou, explained,

Many callers allude to a certain problem, but often do not possess the intimate knowledge about those matters. I understand their desire to raise these issues, and they may be right, but when it comes to a deeper debate with studio guests, it's problematic when they cannot be more precise. Then they often tend to circumvent a straight discussion, and I have to intervene. (Cotonou, April 2025).

There is undoubtedly much truth in the above statement. However, I argue that it does not do justice to those callers who typically strive to stay as close to the facts as possible while garnering the necessary attention for their interventions. Naturally, most journalists prefer well-informed callers and enjoy engaging in debates with those who share a common ground of understanding. Conversely, whenever they have the impression that their show is spoiled by the loss of time, incorrect utterances, and dubious facts, they intervene more directly, for example, by reminding callers to stay on the central topic of the day and be precise.

Few of the interviewed journalists frankly denied any *grogneurs* an important role. Instead, the journalists spoke of *grogneurs*' contributions to the colour of the programmes. However, in some cases, the hosts of such shows actually displayed a certain sense of superiority by pointing to the *grogneurs*' supposedly limited abilities. Other radio journalists had turned away from caller participation, as they no longer found it enriching for their shows.

Nevertheless, many more journalists were more benevolent towards the *grogneurs*' participation. They cited model cases of experienced *grogneurs* while juxtaposing them against a few problematic cases of manipulability. In all cases, none of the interviewed journalists accepted a status equal to the *grogneurs* beyond that described in the media laws (see II, footnote 12).

Presenters who actively invited *grogneurs* to their shows were particularly popular with the *grogneurs*. They were often invited to CAPP FM for studio discussions, such as *Le grand débat* and *Au-delà de la chronique*. Radio Cotonou also regularly invited frequent callers. For example, Paul Chodaton and Sébastien Gnonhossou were invited to the celebration of the station's first birthday on 22 February 2023. Similarly, Sébastien Gnonhossou and Ramanou Gbadamassi were guests on the morning discussion show *Décryptage* on Radio CAPP FM

on 30 August 2024<sup>4</sup>, hosted by Wilfried Ahouassou. This show extensively addressed the role of the *grogneurs*.

In some cases, the relationships of the hosts to individual *grogneurs* developed more intensively over time and also comprised personal contacts off the air. The two would even occasionally meet at bars or markets to exchange information. Frequent callers, especially in the event of longer discussion shows, may expect to be recognised and greeted with more colloquial expressions, even flattering and joking ones, which is frequently the case (e.g. during interactive discussion shows such as *Échos de l'actualité* on Radio Bénin and *Tribune libre* on CAPP FM, Cotonou). These personal relationships, primarily based on contacts on air between callers and hosts of such call-in shows, have created what Beck coined as a 'technogenic closeness' (Beck 2000), a particular dimension of mediated sociability that refers to the concept proposed by Srinivasan and Abreu Lopes (2020) when comparing such shows in various African countries. Face-to-face encounters may sustain this closeness.

At this point, let us look at the formal status that journalists concede to *grogneurs*. Many of the former recognise that the latter form a particular group of actors who must be dealt with and taken seriously, regardless of their individual relationships with them. As mentioned above, *grogneurs* figure in the media law (*code de la presse*) in its 2015 version as 'assimilated and auxiliary to journalists.' Here, they form part of a larger category of various individuals considered aides to journalists. This group is also comprised of stringers and specialised informants, along with assistants to the editorial staff of a journal or a radio station. In any case, it is an acknowledgement of their existence in their own right (Zakiath Latoundji, then-chairwoman of the journalist association UPMB, Cotonou, November 2022).

This designation implies two meanings. It clarifies that the *grogneurs* are useful partners and their interventions should not be obstructed while distinguishing them clearly from both journalists and regular listeners. In other words, this designation undoubtedly brings about a double advantage for journalists by allowing them to both defend themselves when necessary and mitigate their impact as needed.

Official recognition is sometimes a matter of gracious acts. Back in February 2017, Franck Kpochème, then-president of the journalist association

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4 During this show, studio guests and callers maintained that the *grogne* activities did not constitute a profession but rather a vocation. Only few callers misused these possibilities: 'those who are somewhere in the shadow'.

UPMB, decided to express particular acknowledgement to the most active radio listeners. On the occasion of International Radio Day, he utilised funds provided by UNESCO to celebrate the day. He used a part of the fund to award a special prize to the ‘most loyal listeners’ (*fidèles auditeurs*). Among the awardees were many well-established male and female *grogneurs*, who in turn very much appreciated this act, although others complained about persons missing from the list<sup>5</sup>.

However, other journalists, such as the renowned (now deceased) senior journalist, author, and long-time director of the radio station CAPP FM, Jérôme Carlos, were more hesitant to accept the larger role of the *grogneurs*. Carlos pointed to the great diversity of their knowledge, skills, and codes of behaviour, as well as the need to educate them to communicate more effectively and convey relevant information. Conversely, he lauded their strong engagement and acknowledged the *grogneurs*’ steady position within the media landscape today. In a radio comment later published as an article, Carlos recognised their role but asked them to be better organised as a group, with more straightforward rules. *Grogneurs*, he argued, should establish a kind of ‘vocational training’, including standards of action, similar to other corporate groups, such as healers. He suggested instructing *grogneurs* to become veritable ‘conscientious objectors’ (Carlos 2016).

A greater formalisation of their status, to better distinguish trustworthy and skilled activists from idle and malevolent actors, is also a demand of many journalists (see e.g. Hessoun 2016, 2017).

In some cases, journalists entertain good relations with chosen *grogneurs*, those they esteem because of the quality of their accounts, their ability to raise important issues, and their discipline to adhere to some basic rules when speaking on the air. Some journalists also acknowledged that *grogneurs* were often more familiar with local events and issues than journalists were. These journalists noted that they were typically heavily involved in their daily work and responsibilities at their radio stations, which left them with only limited time and material resources to conduct extensive research. Of course, they also

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5 Among the 40 awardees were El Hadj Ramanou Gbadamassi, Georgette Akueson, Mamert Azandosessi, Hermann Meton, Barnabé Agbekponou, Clément Assolé, Solange Koukoui, Laurentine Davo, Sébastien Gnonhossou, Rachidi Oba, Symphorose Agbangbé, Sylvestre Oloundadé, Eugène Ewagnignon, Firmin Allokpé, Osmed Mindehouegnon, Pépé Tchenangnon, Pélagie Donhou, Jules Agbodjeman, and Taofick Aklokpanon.

benefitted from their respective networks (i.e. informers, friends, and peers) while always eager to learn about the breaking news before the *grogneurs* made them public so that they could use these breaking news stories for their work. To attain preliminary information, the journalists sometimes approached the *grogneurs*. However, in turn, they had to reciprocally disclose bits and pieces of their knowledge, at least informally.

*Grogneurs* often explicitly request that journalists continue to research the topics and problems they raise. They utter demands such as ‘do your research’ (*faites vos enquêtes*), ‘come to that place in question right after the show and produce a report’, or ‘start an investigation’. In this sense, the *grogneurs* may become ‘cue givers’ when it comes to providing journalists with valuable information that they can use for their own reports.

At Radio Nanto FM, journalists in these cases promised, ‘We will get there’ (*nous allons descendre*) to report on a problem raised by a caller (e.g. if the main market in the city had a somewhat weak organisation). This practice was reminiscent of the case of the above-mentioned radio station Arzèkè FM in Parakou. During the daily editorial session, pertinent topics from the morning *grogne* show (6:30–7:00) were chosen that could have local political news potential for subsequent coverage. In the editorial meeting, these issues were added to the topic board. Usually, a journalist was commissioned to verify the information, research any further developments, and create a short report for the lunchtime news at 1 p.m. Here, professional scrutiny applied, as then-editor-in-chief Donatien Djèglé mentioned: ‘We just have to pay attention separating facts from opinions’ (Parakou, October 2021).

Furthermore, the authorities of the city administration were confronted with the critical statements of the *grogneurs* from the morning to explicate the issues from their perspective (author’s observations: July 2024, August 2025). In another case, a *grogneur* provided information about a broken water tube near his home. Reporting on the issue by talking to local residents as well as the district chief, journalists from Arzèkè FM then confronted the authorities of the water firm with the problem. These journalists discovered that the latter were unaware of the situation. In this case, a caller had actually helped to advance reparation works (journalist Léon Okacé, Parakou, August 2025). In another situation, the station Fraternité FM, still in Parakou, received a *grogne* call in August 2025 addressing the issue of a lack of teachers in a school. Journalists were sent to see both the school and those in office who administrated the school. Furthermore, they responded to a robbery and visited both those targeted at the kiosk and the witnesses. Then, they spoke with the police, as

such events were becoming increasingly common in that municipality (journalist Épiphane Chabi, Parakou, 19.8.25).

This approach is also typical for Nanto FM in Natitingou, although not in a systematic way. Consider this telling example, which I propose to recount in more detail. In October 2021, a caller named Bako phoned in to an early morning *grogne* show at Nanto FM and stated that there was a considerable problem with the tap water supply in his area, specifically in the quarter of Boriyouré. He explained that some neighbours who lived across the street would benefit from a constant water supply. In contrast, he had not been completely connected to the system in his own house. He had been living there for a couple of months after buying and renovating the property, which was meant to serve as a pensioners' retreat. This call was meticulously noted by Remy, the host of the show, who is one of the station's main journalists. He brought the issue to the daily news desk meeting at approximately 9 a.m., during which it was decided to follow up on the issue. The team was willing to inquire about the respective situation on site and confront the authorities concerned with the issue.

As usual, the topic was recorded in the daily diary of the news desk and then written on the main blackboard, which is intended to programme the overall schedule of coverage for the station (21.20.2021 – *Manque d'eau dans les robinets de certains habitants à Boriyouré / raisons / Bienvenue Fandé & Bénédicte*). The board specified that the experienced journalist Bienvenue Fandé, as well as Bénédicte, a young female intern, were chosen to interview the caller and, later, the director of the local water agency, along with other inhabitants and the head of the area (*chef d'arrondissement*).

I had the opportunity to accompany these journalists when they visited the caller at his place in Boriyouré. Indeed, the person had no current water at his home, despite the promises he had received. He demonstrated everything at his premises by showing dry taps and water pipes. The informant spoke in a vivid yet precise manner, a real gift to any journalist on duty. However, the director of the local water agency was not yet ready to answer, as we learned by phone. Thus, we decided to further investigate the issue alongside the respective road by talking to other people affected by the same problem, as well as those benefiting from the supply. At that moment, various informants raised the suspicion that the tubes were installed for some residents who were acquainted with the water authorities, whereas other planned works had to be postponed. In any case, the reasons were not completely clear at that moment. We returned to the radio station to edit the recorded interviews and insert a first take into the midday news. Thus, the journalists demonstrated their will-

ingness to take callers' concerns seriously. They knew that the affair still required additional coverage, including the forthcoming statements from the director of the water service. The journalists mentioned that the fact that the man was a frequent listener influenced their decision to cover the affair. Since he was a trustworthy man, they esteemed him because of his reasonable interventions in various shows. Later, his problems with water supply were solved (author's observations: Natitingou, October 2021).

In a similar vein, especially in the early periods of the show *La grogne matinal*, Golfe FM pursued complaints issued by the *grogneurs* quite seriously. Subsequently, this coverage was later expanded when Golfe TV started broadcasting in 2007. Here, particularly problems with infrastructure (e.g. defunct roads) were among the main topics chosen. The desk of CAPP FM is also usually eager to use some of the issues raised by the *grogneurs* for its own purposes. These can be part of a special slot in the main news (*rubrique informations de proximité*). However, journalist Wilfried Ahouassou mentioned the apparent difficulties of reporters on the ground:

Whenever I feel that *grogneurs* are pointing to some urgent matters in their neighbourhood, which are worth to pursue, I would send a member of my team out there. Unfortunately, it is then quite often awkward to juxtapose the claims of the *grogneurs* which justifications of the respective authorities, because the latter would often simply refuse to talk to the journalist. (Cotonou, August 2022)

During the main news shows (at 13 and 19 o'clock), CAPP FM assembles selected *grogneurs'* statements together with what is called *vox populi* or *micro-trottoir*, opinions collected on that day on the streets. In other cases, journalists attempt to withhold information for publication at a more suitable time (personal communication, Philibert Abibou, 19 April 2025, and Rachida Oussou, 28 December 2023). In almost all interviews, the hosts emphasised their responsibility to avoid any trouble with the media authorities.

Moreover, journalists avoid the excessive participation of the *grogneurs* concerning delicate and controversial subjects (e.g. Radio Bénin, *90 minutes pour convaincre*). Many of them, especially those from local radio stations, are cautious, as my interviews with then-station director Gaston Yamaro from Radio Deeman, a community radio station in Parakou, revealed (Parakou, 30 July 2024). They prefer focused debates while averting *grogne* shows to avoid defamation.

By and large, journalists and *grogneurs* need each other. Journalists are eager to acquire information from *grogneurs*, on the air or informally, which they do not receive firsthand. They need skilled callers to enrich their interactive programmes and produce suitable shows that are appreciated by many listeners. *Grogneurs* often point to their steady activities, such as this statement by Roland Gbemana:

Journalists and directors of radio stations simply need us, because we help them to produce their daily radio programmes: not only do we intervene in various *grogne* shows, but we also call in extensively many other interactive programmes, be they quiz shows, advice or educational programmes, and of course talk shows with politicians, experts or music stars. They must allow us to make our statements and comments on political issues, whether they like our positions or not. (Cotonou, October 2021)

Many *grogneurs* repeatedly emphasised that they are much closer to the current life on the streets to witness insufficiencies as well as firsthand events. A notable case was the fire outbreak in May 2023 within the Zongo market of Parakou. Adam Bachirou witnessed the tragedy directly from his adjacent workshop. Subsequently, he gave interviews to radio and TV stations, while during various *grogne* shows, he talked extensively about the issue. He argued that he could analyse the causes in detail as an observer of the market's deficiencies for a longer time span (Parakou, July 2024).

However, journalists are eager to maintain their position, so they often point to the limited abilities of some (not all) *grogneurs*. The *grogneurs*, in turn, definitely need the journalists to publicise their issues and provide them a space for self-expression. They need these stages to realise their calling (if applicable) to fulfil the demands of those who entrust them with information (if applicable) or build up their public reputation (which is always applicable).

When I interviewed the *grogneurs*, they often expressed regret that radio hosts did not offer more freedom for callers during their programmes. They especially criticised hosts who were too defensive and did not demonstrate enough courage to tolerate critical statements about the government (Group discussion, Cotonou, 5 November 2023, cf. p. 122). *Grogneurs*, however, make subtle distinctions between hosts who generally shun anything slightly critical of the government and those who are more balanced and permit critical debates on the air while still being careful to respect the necessary boundaries. Conversely, journalists accuse many *grogneurs* of sensationalism and want to

set certain limits to their interventions. Wilfried Ahouassou once expressed, 'We don't want any spectacle' (Cotonou, 14 April 2025). Both journalists and active callers, however, are quite aware of their interdependency.

A few *grogneurs* may well like to conceptualise themselves as journalists. In most cases, however, they strive to draw tight boundaries so that their roles are not blurred. Almost none of the *grogneurs* called themselves 'journalists'. Conversely, no journalist regarded the *grogneurs* as equal partners or colleagues. The journalists did not want to expose themselves in the same dimension as *grogneurs* usually did. Instead, the journalists sought to be considered thoroughly neutral.

Both journalists and *grogneurs* aimed to preserve their positions associated with strategic advantages. Indeed, the *grogneurs* could, in severe cases, be sentenced for disinformation, yet they did not always need to care about the completeness or exhaustiveness of their information. In this regard, they preferred their role as simple callers, while the journalists were keen to preserve a more professional attitude and corporate identity. The latter did not want to relinquish control, especially in situations of doubt on the air. Ultimately, the hosts always have the means to suspend a caller from a show.

Thus, reciprocal exchanges between the two sides do not obscure the evident power differentials between the groups of actors. Journalists still hold the key position to enable *grogneurs'* actions since they maintain control over daily production routines. They have various options (e.g. cancelling, switching callers off, and pre-filtering), which their callers do not have. Furthermore, the use of divergent communication channels (e.g. *radio trottoir*, news from messenger services by callers versus work mainly with official information by journalists), as well as access to sources (e.g. delicate information from whistleblowers to individual *grogneurs*), differentiates both groups of actors.

However, the *grogneurs* are less concerned with the task of further elaborating on topics, such as confronting various stakeholders to counterbalance their coverage, practices that *grogneurs* expect from journalists. Nevertheless, they should be well equipped by knowing everything about their topic. Thus, when they feel their arguments will not be taken seriously, they can repeat them. *Grogneurs* have fewer possibilities for official reporting because they do not have press credentials. Nevertheless, both *grogneurs* and journalists must protect their sources.

For journalists, much more is at stake in the event of misconduct: journalists can personally lose their jobs, while broadcasters can be reprimanded by the HAAC. *Grogneurs* can also be sued. However, they can extend the protec-

tion of their sources and informants further than journalists. In Chapter VI, I revisit these aspects when discussing the role of *grogneurs* against the background of theoretical debates in general.

## **Grogne Shows and Public Communication**

In this book, I aim to offer a detailed analysis of interactive shows in Benin while going beyond an overly normative assessment of the *grogneurs'* activities. Following this endeavour, I want to highlight the ambivalence of their activities while providing a broader perspective on their public role.

*Grogne* shows have profoundly impacted the realm of public communication in Bénin, both qualitatively and content-wise. In the past, some issues were initially raised by *grogneurs*. Here, I refer to a scandal revolving around the illicit vending of public real estate, which was first issued by the *grogneurs*, subsequently covered by radio news, and later led to prosecution.

In Sèmè-Kpodji, large plots were sold from what was actually identified in the official register as a public area. This fact was revealed by a *grogneur*, who called in repeatedly. Later, journalists from Radio Bénin went there to verify the fact and called for legal action. Newspapers then covered the problem as well. In this case, the mayor was simply dismissed. However, in Abomey-Calavi, this practice led to the sentencing of former mayor George Bada (Kouasssi 2021). Conversely, the issue of public real estate still arises in both *grogne* shows and during thematically centred, interactive radio debates.

Ultimately, *grogne* shows contribute to an increasingly rapid flow of information, accelerated by the exploding use of mobile phones, social media, messenger services, and mobile actors such as motorbike taxi drivers (*zémidjan*) in urban areas (Hinnou 2016), a fact that challenges politicians and media producers alike. In addition, subtenants' multiplication and networking of sites, sources, and information circles are also expanded by transnational media influences. Today, they unfold hand in hand with a growing complexity of discursive fields in Bénin, which corresponds to a changing society characterised by increasing urbanisation, population growth, and mediatisation.

Furthermore, these interactive media increase the hybridity of elements and actors of radio production (a general feature of networked media systems today Chadwick 2017). *Grogne* shows in the Republic of Bénin bear witness to the fact that the production and dissemination of information occur more than

ever before as a decentralised process, which involves a growing multitude of actors, professionals, and non-professionals.

Without the role of the *grogneurs*, who have gained much experience over the past years, an important element in these networks would still be missing.

### ***Grogneurs*, Listeners, and Administrative Authorities**

As mentioned in Chapter I, *grogne* shows and the *grogneurs* are permanently subject to lively debates, as well as interventions by media authorities. *Grogneurs*, especially those in the Cotonou area, are suspected of being susceptible to manipulation. Some *grogneurs*, in fact, misuse their skills, yet such cases are rare. Conversely, other *grogneurs* maintain their personalities and are well appreciated by their communities.

Consider 'One-Two', a very active *grogneur* who is a wheelchair user in Natitingou. He is a tyre vulcaniser in a workshop in the heart of the city. Many city dwellers appreciate him as a gentle, open-minded person who expresses his points of view thoughtfully. He uses Dendi and Yoruba (his mother tongue), as well as French. Once, he undertook a march to Cotonou to meet the president, an endeavour that was highly mediated and aimed to appeal to the cause of people with disabilities (Natitingou, August 2022).

As I conversed with various listeners in Bénin, it became evident that the *grogneurs* mostly enjoyed a double-edged reputation. Listeners and authorities praised the *grogneurs'* contribution to the articulation of public social problems as 'significant for the progress of society' (deputy and former Minister Lazare Sèhouéto, mentioned in Otchoun 2005, who, nevertheless, disapproved of cases of manipulation). However, the *grogneurs* were sometimes criticised for being self-centred while seeking publicity at all costs.

I previously mentioned that many radio listeners in Bénin appreciate most of the *grogneurs* and admire their courage on the air. '*Grogneurs* take the opportunity to express often what others can't express or fear to say. We should encourage them.' (Rosalie, Cotonou, 28.07.2022).

Some *grogneurs* are also well known to other listeners due to their involvement in public affairs, for instance, Georgette Akuesson, president of the NGO Life and Development in Bénin (*Vie et Développement au Bénin*).

Indeed, many people share a certain admiration for those who call in so often. These voices underline the audacity of many *grogneurs*, especially concern-

ing sensitive issues such as the liberation of political prisoners<sup>6</sup>, forced evictions of settlers for public infrastructure works<sup>7</sup>, and the financing of political parties<sup>8</sup>. These individuals admired how frequent callers expressed what many others would experience but could not address in the same way. Often, other interested listeners praised people they often heard on the radio or even knew personally:

Sébastien, he is courageous, he always speaks very clearly and addresses the political aspects very directly. (E.O., former MP and tradesman, Cotonou, April 2023)

Nevertheless, several were also sceptical of the *grogneurs'* intentions. Various listeners told me that they did not like some of their attitudes, as this listener declared:

These are people who exaggerate, with respect to their tone and their frequency on air. Should I always listen to such statements? (Urbain, Cotonou, August 2023)

A few people accused *grogneurs* of being manipulated to act in purely private conflicts, driven by financial advantages (see section 'Remunerations'). According to my investigations, there were, in fact, such cases, especially in the 2000s, but they have become extremely rare since then.

However, as we have seen, *grogneurs* are driven by various motives. Consequently, their activities cannot simply be subsumed under normatively distorted slogans such as 'democratic participation' versus 'the abuse of public

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6 In this respect, *grogneurs* such as Sébastien Gnonhossou and Paul Chodatou constantly demand the liberation of political prisoners (e.g. oppositional politicians), such as Joël Aïvo and Reckya Madougou, who were both arrested for plotting against the president just prior to the 2021 elections. Sébastien Gnonhossou has also always addressed the fate of inmates, who often do not have humane conditions in prison. (Here, reforms have been initiated that are not yet effective, especially because the prisons are overcrowded).

7 Sébastien Gnonhossou and Solange Koukoui constantly reiterate the destiny of settlers who are evicted from their (informal) housing due to urban restructuring and forced relocations since 2017.

8 According to the law, political parties regularly receive public money according to their seats in parliament, a fact that is disapproved of by many Béninese.

media'. These aspects are potential components of their practices but vary extensively from person to person and regionally.

According to my research, the *grogneurs* in Bénin have managed to consolidate their status and attitude in recent years, despite some obstacles. This characteristic means that they are accepted, even more so than a few years ago, as instances of abuse of their capabilities are becoming less frequent. Their behaviour is increasingly based on a clearly perceptible framework characterised by polite rhetoric and a noticeable reluctance to openly reproach individuals, as well as by primarily fact-based work. This issue relates to avoiding potential legal consequences that may have been observed in past cases or the fear of prosecution. Nonetheless, it also follows an attempt at a kind of 'internal purification', especially among the organised *grogneurs*, to overcome negative views of their practices among other listeners and radio journalists. Simultaneously, their calls reveal greater clarity, thematic precision, information, and rhetorical finesse. They also avoid overly explicit counterpositions against the president.

In 2022, the public relations department of the presidency attempted to replicate the *grogne* format by publishing a free phone number for callers to share concerns within their neighbourhood. Thereafter, a pre-produced show entitled *Allô citoyen* presented selected statements, together with recorded reactions by the authorities. Participation declined when callers realised that not all of their issues were addressed or received attention. When BIP Radio then offered such a follow-up practice in everyday life on the air (see p.109), the programme came to an end.

Many listeners regularly tune in to *grogne* shows daily. Some listeners are indeed more connected to *grogne* shows in Béninese national languages, whereas others prefer French as the language of the country. Many listeners tend to listen more carefully when it comes to topics that concern them personally, such as bad roads in their town or fire outbreaks in their neighbourhood. Other listeners perceive the interventions of the *grogneurs* as a service, not only in their interest but for the interest of all. Most of them still prefer a more balanced and sophisticated debate, which is typical of other shows, such as *Tribune libre* and *Échos de l'actualité*, as well as talk shows with studio guests.

In sum, these opinions underline both the central, pivotal role of the *grogneurs* and their ambivalent position in the Béninese media landscape, which I referred to earlier in the book. They are seen as both advocates for daring people and as self-presenters (e.g. whistleblowers and opinion leaders). Here, it is crucial to distinguish between indirect and direct references

of the broader public to the *grogneurs*. Indirect references include the previously mentioned general reputation of the entire group of *grogneurs* in plural, including their activities and interventions, regardless of a reference to any individual *grogneur* or a particular issue they may raise.

More direct references, relating to individual *grogneurs*, including their performances on the air and the information provided by them, draw a somewhat different picture, especially when a *grogneur* is personally known. *Grogneurs* operating in the vicinity of listeners (e.g. One-Two and Adam Bachirou) are mostly much more cherished by the latter compared to others. *Grogne* shows today are not the dominant means of information for regular audiences due to their lack of immediacy. Here, mobile and fast media (e.g. WhatsApp) certainly perform better (see the discussion in Chapter VI). In some cases, listeners are inspired by the *grogneurs'* complaints to undertake actions of betterment on their own, such as the young entrepreneur Etienne Kinnouézan, popularly known as 'Chef Patrouille', who helped to repair some potholes (August 2023), or a trader who started a fundraiser for the injured people of a car accident (March 2023).

The fact that the *grogneurs* rarely address rumours or unverified information from social media or dubious WhatsApp groups has even enhanced their position as trustworthy and reliable (see p. 121). Both the political pressure on the media under the Talon government and internal actions, more precisely, debates inside the networks of *grogneurs*, have somewhat helped to 'clear up' this field. In a dialectical way, I argue that growing political pressures have made the *grogneurs* more aware of their limits and their *raison d'être*. This situation prompted most of them to sharpen their senses to know what is possible on the air and what is not, while perfecting their proficiency. In other words, their stance has become firmer as they have been less accused of abuses, while their constant daring to address sensitive public issues continues to evolve along the lines of what is legally possible.

Are these *grogne* shows actively listened to by active politicians? Mostly, yes. This remark is primarily based on the listening habits of many people aged 30 and above with an intellectual background. Most of them are accustomed to turning on the radio as soon as they wake up, as the radio serves as an accompanying device throughout their office days. Over the last decade, the number of TVs in offices has increased, and good morning shows have become a staple of many people's morning routines.

Indeed, morning radio programmes are convenient to listen to, either in bed or during the morning toilet. Politicians either tune in to *grogne* shows per-

sonally or, as various interviews revealed, charge their assistants to listen to them. The latter report on the most important interventions: those concerning their offices or positions. I already mentioned the example of former President Yayi Boni, who was known to listen to the early morning *grogne* shows almost every day while working in Cotonou (Adagbé, quoted in Sossou 2018).

*Grogneurs* are, of course, satisfied when problematic conditions improve after they have complained. For example, Paul Chodatou remembered that once, some staff members from the main university hospital in Cotonou contacted him, as they were upset because their overtime payment requests had been denied, yet false bills had been produced by their superiors. He asked for proof, and they provided documents. Thereafter, Paul reported about these grievances without revealing his sources. After a while, he heard that the hospital director had been dismissed following official investigations, which may have been due to his inquiries (Cotonou, November 2022).

However, the authorities (i.e. directors of governmental agencies and communal services) relate to *grogne* shows and *grogneurs'* interventions in a much more ambivalent way. As individual listeners, they share the curiosity of any other listeners when learning about unheard facts and issues. As representatives of organisations or governmental and communal administrations, they are keen to know about deficiencies and problems that concern them while reflecting on potential solutions. Conversely, they often feel wrongly critiqued and question how their work and priorities are seen:

Sometimes, *grogneurs* point to issues that are not entirely true. For example, there was a case when they were talking about a rise in staple prices, which was, in fact, rather moderate. In other cases, they may say the truth but should know that we don't have all the necessary budget to remedy yet. Should we postpone other works to prioritise *grogneurs'* concerns? That would be the work of the community council, not the *grogneurs*. (Antoine W., employee of the city administration, Parakou, July 2023)

To talk about political issues more frankly is hampered by fear. Apart from overall administrative authorities, no individual names should be used when blaming grievances. Callers may, however, directly address their critical points to studio guests. This was the case, for example, on 2 November 2025, when Sebastien directly addressed a former minister during a show, to explain why roads were badly constructed during his time in office. The latter referred to the limits and exigencies of bidding procedures of that time.

The divergent positions of the *grogneurs* and members of the state administration are displayed during studio discussions, where representatives from both sides are invited, as is often the case at Radio CAPP FM, BIP Radio in Cotonou, Radio Arzèkè, Radio Fraternité in Parakou, and Radio Nanto in Natitingou. Additionally, many higher-ranking politicians listen to these shows out of curiosity, while also gaining insight into their governance. Some of them charge members of their staff to listen and report accusations of all kinds. However, they do not readily respond to these statements, which may further exacerbate problems that were only vaguely addressed by the caller. Nevertheless, these high-ranking individuals keep an eye on issues by either trying to block the proliferation of that news or, conversely, assigning their personnel to resolve it.

In many cases, administrators feel unconcerned for formal reasons (e.g. the district commissioner's responsibility instead of the mayor's responsibility). Typically, when the authorities are newly appointed or elected, they may effectively intervene personally. However, later, they point to 'other priorities'. Nevertheless, to be 'updated' on current debates, some politicians as well as high-ranking authorities (e.g. town mayors) maintain relationships with some *grogneurs* as part of their network of informants to learn about severe issues in time. In turn, these *grogneurs* are reared by privileged access to the latest news about their service or to broker those relationships, for example, with journalists. Some of them may even receive protection when being intimidated. Hence, these *grogneurs* rarely address critical issues jeopardising their contact, at least not in person.

This approach often does not work well for official authorities, as representatives of the state or municipalities often convey responsibility to others, and most often, they do not face consequences. However, there are exceptions.

For example, repeated negative reports about the state hospital CNHU (*Centre National Hospitalier Universitaire*) in Cotonou ultimately led to an inspection, after which those responsible were transferred or dismissed. Here, the *grogneurs* pointed to the bad reception people received during emergencies. Reports about four people who died because of the failure of electricity supplies, due to dysfunctional replacement engines, increased public anger and outrage (Radio France International 2022).

Thus, interventions on air can be effective, as Sébastien Gnonhossou noted:

Allegations would put companies in a bad light. They want to avoid that at all costs, because they compete with each other and, in addition to good re-

relationships with potential clients, also depend on a good reputation. They also want to avoid inquiries from authorities. That is why they will usually react quickly. (Cotonou, October 2021)

In any case, most *grogneurs* claim a central social role in public affairs as communicators and conveyors of information for the benefit of all. They do not only want to be ‘siphoned off’ as sources of news. Instead, they want to be actively involved as intermediaries, for example, when it comes to official information campaigns, such as the COVID-19 campaign mentioned (see page 144). Nonetheless, it is the mutual support by fellow *grogneurs* and civic supporters, the trust in their own capacities as well as basic legal notions about the scope and nature of their interventions (with all the necessary moderation and politeness), which ultimately helps avoid juridical consequences while withstanding pressure. This pressure, from convocations to intimidating calls, seems to make the *grogneurs* even stronger since they feel a particular personal importance and strength when successfully overcoming these challenges.

### **Friendship and Competition: Relationships Between *Grogneurs***

November 2022. As is often the case, Moïse Ékanyé, Sébastien’s friend, a fellow *grogneur* and mechanic, arrived at his workshop in Cotonou. They discussed an incident in which two callers to a radio show engaged in a dispute. One caller defended the president’s policies, while the other expressed more critical views. Both friends concurred that such positioning should be kept out of these programmes.

*Grogneurs* are generally respectful to one another and support their common cause. Simultaneously, they also compete for public attention. They desire to be acknowledged by their fellows and other listeners as among the best performing and instructive callers in their region. Primarily, they engage in a sporting-like competition, although controversies may also arise in some cases (see below). However, most *grogneurs* who are active in the same region know each other, at least virtually, while most often personally meet each other from time to time.

For instance, *grogneurs* in Parakou and Cotonou consistently meet at regular places. In Cotonou, a meeting place was the former conference centre CO-DIAM and its courtyard in the city centre, as well as the area around the large sports arena and national stadium Mathieu Kérékou, with its numerous small

pubs (both sites are currently under construction). Other customary meeting places are a bar situated within the former Cinema Concorde in Cotonou-Akpakpa and the workshops of known *grogneurs*, such as the one run by Sébastien in Cotonou-Missèbo. In Parakou, *grogneurs* regularly meet at a small pub near the Hotel Central and in public places, such as at Place Bio Guéra or in the vicinity of the French cultural centre of Parakou (*Centre Culturel Français*).

Many *grogneurs* maintain close friendships with fellow *grogneurs* (e.g. Sébastien Gnonhossou and Anselme Kpindjo or Adam Bachirou and Boni Gouda in Parakou). Moreover, these *grogneurs* help each other in various ways. In some cases, they support their activities morally on the air. For example, Rock Ahouanchédé (now deceased) lauded Symphorose Agbangbè during a morning call-in show on Radio Planète (12.10.2021) and urged fellow listeners to respect her for her various social engagements so that President Talon would meet with her.

Often, *grogneurs* greet others on air, especially on religious festivity days, while also participating in the funerals of their relatives. Mainly using WhatsApp, they constantly share information on current events and undisclosed facts, as well as proceedings at the respective radio stations, and discuss whether they addressed their topics accurately on the air. Sometimes, they listen to a show together. Often, they discuss questions of self-protection against unjustified accusations. While still competing in their respective 'expert' positions, many of them support each other concerning personal issues (e.g. during bereavements). Many of them are interconnected via Facebook accounts or as members of the same WhatsApp group.

Apart from these informal networks, in Parakou, Cotonou, and Natitingou, committed *grogneurs* are organised in formal associations. Most often, the primary objective is to foster mutual exchange and cohesion. For instance, the aforementioned association, *Amicale des Faiseurs d'Opinion* (AFOP), was founded in 2011 in Parakou and currently has approximately 25 members. The acting president is currently Boni Gouda (as of 2025). His primary occupation is a technician at a water service.

With its growing importance, this association has become an institution of the self-defence of *grogneurs*. It is intended to help members (approximately 50) learn more about the legal aspects of their actions, particularly regarding the possibilities and limitations of their on-air expressions. Consequently, the *grogneurs* can mentally 'arm' themselves and better distinguish the grounds on which the authorities can really accuse them lawfully. The club is primarily open to anyone who wants to enhance their on-air performance and skills and

who is willing to meet regularly for discussions. However, not all callers can become AFOP members easily, as Adam Bachirou explained:

Anyone who wants to join our association is first put to a period of test. We will observe his activities on air, whether he will respect our rules of conduct, including politeness, factuality, and neutrality. Once accepted within our ranks, he may profit from our further guidance and can expect help when being unjustifiably targeted by authorities. (Parakou, August 2025)

In addition, the *grogneurs* act together concerning critical issues in society. Already back in August 2013, members of the Amicale denounced the waste of public funds on unfinished construction projects (*Les éléphants blancs*) in Parakou. They disseminated a press release, which was widely supported by various media, including newspapers (Ayédèguè 2013). The club still lacks a permanent office but hopes to receive support from civil society in Bénin.

Furthermore, members of the association display solidarity and support when they are falsely accused, as was the case with Adam Bachirou and Boni Gouda in the scandalous building crash (see p. 79). Members of the association (e.g. Boni Gouda and Adam Bachirou) are often the most frequently invited studio guests on discussion shows (Parakou, August 2025).

The most visible and largest association in terms of its members is certainly the listeners club related to the radio station Golfe FM (*Association des Fidèles Amis & Sympathisants du Groupe de Presse la Gazette du Golfe*, AFAS-3G). Its establishment dates back to 1999. The early years of *grogne* shows were when Golfe FM was the visible leader and promoted the genre much earlier and stronger than other stations did later.

The association does not only comprise *grogneurs* since its foundation and leading positions have been occupied by frequent callers (Grätz 2026b). Many of these listeners, as well as the callers, have stood united when *grogne* shows have come under pressure while supporting journalists. Today, the association remains active in supporting the current interactive programmes and is working towards the reopening of Golfe FM (August 2025; *ibid.*).

For a long time, the experienced *grogneur* El Hadj Ramanou Gbadamassi, a businessman and trader living in Abomey-Calavi, presided over the association, which is more than a listeners' club. Organised in several subsections according to towns and neighbourhoods, their members meet regularly to manage tontines, organise fundraisers, and social events. Much is about mutual support in the sense of civic engagement. Among them are some leading fe-

male personalities, such as Solange Koukouï, and long-term *grogneurs* such as Abdel-Wahab Tchassama. Certainly, the most prominent leaders may benefit from the platform when invited to studio discussions, political events, and other public activities.

A similar fan club emerged in relation to the station Radio Soleil (which is now suspended), with eminent *grogneurs* Jean Kpoton, Valentin Ayonou, Eugène Ewagnignon, Pépé Tchenangnon, and Mathieu Hontonou among the members. There is also an association in the town of Djougou, in the north-western part of Bénin. Radio listeners' clubs are essentially a well-established social form in Bénin. The clubs, most often functioning across ethnic and social lines, are an important forum for discussing the quality of programmes, the work of journalists, and the activities of the *grogneurs*. In some cases, a listeners' club – in addition to formal structures such as the advisory board typical of community broadcasters – serves as a forum to express the wishes and recommendations of active audiences (Damome 2020: 618).

Recently, new listeners' clubs have emerged due to their close connection with messenger services, above all, WhatsApp, which allows an easy and translocal access to them. This access applies to the listeners' club CFA–Nanto (*Club des fidèles Auditeurs de la Radio Nanto FM*), related to the local community broadcaster Nanto FM in Natitingou, which was established in 2021 by frequent callers. This club co-organises events at the station, hosts fundraisers to assist members in dire situations, and actively shares news about relevant shows on a WhatsApp forum. Here, listeners living far beyond the station's broadcasting range, for example the passionate *grogneur* Sanda N'gobi in Perma (often calling in to Radio Benin; Figure 8), can find recorded files of their desired radio shows. Similarly, there are various informal networks of locally active *grogneurs*, such as those in Porto-Novo, Bohicon, and elsewhere.

According to the protagonists, these associations, on whatever formal grounds, first and foremost aim at mutual support, cohesion, and self-defence. They help members learn more about the legal aspects of calling in, including both the possibilities and limits of their interventions. Thus, members can better understand the kinds of issues the authorities may actually reproach them for (see in detail Grätz 2026a).

Other *grogneurs* have joined existing associations, such as the Consumer Protection Association (*Association pour la défense des consommateurs*, ADECO), and established NGOs with a broader range of activities, such as Sébastien Gnonhossou, who engages in his NGO *Amour Pour ma Patrie* together with fellow *grogneurs*, including Valentin Ayonou, Nicaise Atchadé, and Anselme

Kpindjo. Rock-Yves Ahouanchédé was one of the leading members of the association of handicapped people in Cotonou.

Despite this general cohesion, debates often exist, especially in Cotonou and Parakou, between some more established *grogneurs* and newcomers. Some of the latter have not always been easily accepted by others to ‘speak on behalf of all’ since they are not considered by those from an ‘inner circle of elders’ to be ‘real *grogneurs*’. Conversely, the former insist on their skills and sometimes allege that newcomers are less rigorous in preparing their interventions, talking inappropriately. Other *grogneurs*, in turn, often think about their counterparts as snobbish.

## Remunerations

The issue of money is one of the most controversial when it comes to discussing the public role of the *grogneurs* in the country. Many people simply argue that the *grogneurs* are mainly eager to get money for their ‘work’ on the air, regardless of the topic and demand. Rumour has it that during presidential elections in 2016, then-candidate Talon supposedly spent large sums to ‘buy’ *grogneurs* to turn public opinion in his favour. Money is, again, an issue that is subject to controversies among the *grogneurs*, who accuse each other of sometimes being bribed.

Some notorious cases of *grogneurs*, who in the past openly accepted payments for services, have certainly contributed to this opinion. Principally, it is difficult to investigate the actual revenues of individual *grogneurs*. However, my investigations revealed that many *grogneurs* receive gifts for their activities, which they usually explain as compensation for their direct or indirect expenses, such as phone credit. Herman Méton argued,

Some people – not all – offer me money. These are small sums, no sums to make a living, but help me pursuing my activities. Because it is a kind of work as well: I am studying the respective documents, I will then further investigate into those matters, and I am thinking about an appropriate manner of their presentation. You should be able to summarise the facts precisely to be well understand on air. It is not the money for which I am calling in. In addition, it is not ‘denounce to denounce’ (*dénoncer pour dénoncer*) either. I really want to help change things. (Cotonou, October 2021)

Most often, the *grogneurs* benefit from small favours, such as invitations to share a drink or assistance with repairing a motorbike. Well-known *grogneurs* who are either quite mobile in roaming around their localities and visiting public places and offices, as well as those working in publicly accessible workshops, may profit indirectly from their celebrity with respect to their income or business activities. Regularly talking on the air is a form of advertising that can help attract clients. For instance, One-Two, the handicapped *grogneur* in Natitingou, mentioned,

People know me from my radio interventions, and they know that I like the truth and I am honest. They come to see me here at my workshop and thank me for my engagement, and occasionally, they will charge with repairing works as well. (Natitingou, August 2024)

Similarly, Sébastien Gnonhossou and Abdel Wahhabi Tchassama, both tailors, reported steady flows of clients due to their radio contributions. For some *grogneurs*, any financial support is justified and even required due to their public role in society, as they often argue. For others, such demands would hamper their independence and be incongruent with strong intrinsic motivation. This debate is sometimes led in public, even during a *grogne* show, as this recent example underlines.

On Friday, 6 March 2020, the morning *grogne* show on CAPP FM was the theatre for an indirect dispute among *grogneurs* in the Cotonou–Parakou area. Several *grogneurs* openly asked for any kind of compensation for their efforts. However, two *grogneurs* did not join in with this kind of joint auto-proclamation. To be more precise, Ganhoutodé Ékanyé argued that compensation would play a crucial role in reference to the costs they would incur when paying the phone tariffs.

In a similar vein, Jacques Avokan, after lauding the deeds of current President Talon, joined the debate with Valentin Ayonou and Pierre Mimonzoundé. Conversely, Sylvestre Olounlade stated that he would intervene on the air because he felt it was an imperative personal matter, not a professional one. To demand compensation would be ‘a shame’. For him, the engagement would be a sacrifice. During that show, callers also raised several other issues, including the ongoing recruitment for the police, as well as a lorry that was damaging a water pipeline. However, it seemed they were initiating a discussion about their own affairs.

My research revealed that few *grogneurs* make a living from these remunerations. They earn their income primarily from a range of basic professional activities, as diverse as these are, including commerce, shop ownership, crafts, and small-scale employment. Regarding more indirect benefits, these may be related to either social activities or businesses at large. As mentioned earlier, many leading *grogneurs* are active members of associations. Thus, their role as a *grogneur* supports their position within the association, which can help them expand their networks.

### The COVID-19 Crisis and Role-Taking

At the end of March 2020, the Bénin government, like many other countries worldwide, adopted stringent measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. Among these were the creation of a disease protection barrier belt around all major southern cities and the implementation of rules to prevent public gatherings. Debates about the level of risks, governmental policies, and individual modes of behaviour also arose in *grogne* shows. On Friday, 27 March 2020, both during the morning *grogne* shows and the evening debates, various *grogneurs* warned fellow listeners to accept a widely spread rumour about a rigid lockdown to be decreed by the following Monday. Many frequent callers not only urged everyone to respect governmental orders but also demanded to be respected as influencers, as they would contribute to keeping up with clear news. Rock-Yves Ahouanchédé, previously an eminent *grogneur* in Cotonou, demanded the following:

Since the arrival of that evil thing, there are numerous kinds of false information. Thus, we, the *faiseurs d'opinion* should be associated to all campaigns of information. People know me and my role. Therefore, many people ask me about these issues as well, and we should be always updated to exercise our role. (Cotonou, October 2021)

The measures taken by the government were (except for some critical points on their implementation) mostly supported by the *grogneurs*. They saw themselves as those who could convey important information and be trusted. In a similar vein, Mathieu Hontonou and Sébastien Gnonhossou underlined that people should listen to them, the *grogneurs*, and not accept fake news. The information department of the presidency (*Cellule de Communication*) should also associate

with the *grogneurs* and make them part of the overall sensitisation strategies, which was a further argument of callers such as Alain Zoumaton and Brice Sognibé during the *grogne* show aired on Radio CAPP FM (27 March 2020).

During this period, 'purer' *grogne* shows featured constant interventions by the *grogneurs* on current events and necessary actions to take to observe. Moreover, particular call-in shows with a thematic focus were dedicated to the issue (e.g. *Décryptage*, *Questions actuelles*, and *Tribune libre*). These programmes triggered subsequent debates between callers, journalists, and studio guests. In fact, in March 2022, the Ministry of Health invited *grogneurs* as '*faiseurs d'opinion*' to a workshop to discuss ideas and modes of argumentation to counter the pandemic. The event took place in Cotonou on 3 March 2022, during which the president of the association AFAS-3G, where many *grogneurs* are organised. El Hadj Ramanou Gbadamassi also spoke (Gouvernement du Bénin 2022; Yai 2022).

These examples highlight the process of role-taking, which unfolds in tandem with growing self-esteem, particularly among individuals who are frequently in the public eye. The more established *grogneurs* network continually by exchanging information frequently. Hence, they establish joint actions. Apart from the mentioned COVID-19 campaign, the *grogneurs* jointly critiqued the high-level prices of matriculating motor bikes in early 2016 (Nabil 2016). They also supported the introduction of biodegradable bags to replace the typical yet environmentally harmful plastic bags in October 2018 (Observateurs engagés 2018). Ramanou Gbadamassi explicated,

We are able to put our efforts together to support a common cause. Many such voices will gain a strength, and the authorities would hardly omit such grievances. (Abomey-Calavi, August 2023)

Apart from these campaigns, the *grogneurs* took a decisive stance during several moments in the recent political crisis of the country. Here, we revisit the discussion of topics and subjects of broader importance on the public agenda, as mentioned in Chapter II, and the related clashes surrounding the parliamentary elections in May 2019, as mentioned in Chapter I. At this moment, most *grogneurs* did not only criticise governmental policies but pleaded the need for dialogue and concordance.

## Grogneurs and Politics

Well-known *grogneurs* may capitalise on their public fame to better their positions within civic associations. Only to a minimal degree can they transform this cultural capital into a political career. Here, the case of the *grogneurs* in Bénin largely opposes findings from other sub-Saharan African countries. For instance, Selormey's account of Ghanaian interactive FM programmes (2013) highlighted that frequent callers in metropolitan Accra often act on behalf of (and are paid by) political parties (op.cit.: 158). They are, in a way, paid public relations agents who attempt to influence public opinion along the lines of the respective parties' political agendas. In a similar vein, Brisset reported from Uganda that frequent callers (i.e. serial callers) use their interventions as a kind of training ground to become publicly renowned political actors in the making (2018, 2019; see also Sonko 2010 in Sénégal), where these callers often run as candidates for communal elections.

Conversely, in Bénin, only very few such cases exist of *grogneurs* becoming political actors. One example is Clément Assoclé, an experienced *grogneur*, who became a local counsellor (*conseiller local*) in an administrative unit of his home neighbourhood, Lokokoukoumè, near Cotonou. He still enjoys much esteem amongst the *grogneurs*, although most of them mentioned that he now must avoid mingling politics and media interventions of this kind (Interview March 2024).

Another such case relates to the (former) mayor, Ignace Ouorou, of Copargo, a small town in northwestern Bénin (Groß 2018; my interview in Copargo, August 2022). He is known as an active *grogneur*. He intervened most often at the community station Radio Solidarité FM Djougou in the regional capital and subsequently transformed his reputation into a political mandate (Parvex/Tossounon 2016:25). Moreover, the well-known *grogneur* Moïse Ganhoutodé Ékanyé became a member of the political party *Les Démocrates*. Another prominent example is Romain Dagbomey, who stood as a candidate for the *Parti Républicain* in an electoral constituency in Bohicon.

Nevertheless, entering politics could result in a loss of reputation among other *grogneurs*. Most *grogneurs* consider such a decision as a shift to a different camp and, consequently, a shift of media standards and ethics. They recognise this move as a legitimate step, which would require the abandonment of most calling practices altogether.

Hence, only a few *grogneurs* pursue a political career. Those who formulate ambition do so mainly at the local, municipal, or city levels, where they are

anchored close to their place of residence, their circle of friends and supporters, and their interest in improving public affairs. Moreover, the vast majority of *grogneurs* in Bénin do not act as indirect political agents. They may have a penchant for a political line (e.g. the late Jean Kpton for the exiled politician Adjovi), they may also occasionally join a political movement, but they are, with exceptions, not direct agents of political leaders. This fact suggests the divergent role of frequent callers compared to the mentioned Ghanaian case. In Bénin, most *grogneurs* would claim, as pretentious as this might sound, to be 'truly neutral', and not criticise something for the sake of criticism. Most of them would join Paul Chodaton who often states: 'When authorities do something good, we would laude this, as much as we criticize them when they don't'. (Cotonou, April 2025)

## Changes and Adaptations

Throughout the years, *grogne* shows have transformed. Rules and regulations have been modified in response to external pressures (see Chapter II, p.53), yet audiences still tune in to these shows every day. However, these shows are less striking regarding an immediate mobilisation for state authorities, in contrast to the beginning of these programmes at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s, when the authorities (e.g. ministers and mayors) attempted to solve issues in one way or the other, primarily to prevent disrespect in public opinion.

A journalist who has hosted *grogne* shows from the beginning on at Golfe FM, Peggy Ludovic Dagga, remembered the situation in those days and the subsequent modifications. He mentioned that at the beginning, the shows were much more open, and diverse people called in. Certainly, this aspect was a significant advantage compared to the situation today, with several of those shows, as well as other means of conveying sensitive information (e.g. WhatsApp). Dagba reviewed these times critically, when the struggles with the media authorities began:

At Golfe FM, we were forerunners and faced both respect and critics. In Bénin, these shows were novel. We had to equilibrate the large public interest and quest for revelations, with requirements of radio professionalism. That was not only a demand issued by the HAAC or some angered politicians, but we also felt ourselves that we had to handle things in a better way. The decision to work with pre-recordings was certainly not an ideal

one but gave us a position to better steer the show. Moreover, interactive shows were then conducted by the most experienced hosts only. (Cotonou, October 2021)

Note: Later, Dagba became the editor-in-chief of Radio Diaspora FM but passed away in 2025.

These perceptible modifications regarding the stricter handling of their interventions, especially by radio stations which are politically close to the government, combined with the growing expertise, skills, and self-control of *grogneurs*, were clearly expressed by leading *grogneurs*. Barnabé mentioned,

We detect a stronger partiality of some hosts. You often immediately feel when they are on a political side. Those who are on the side of the government. They would not accept criticising the government too much. They would say, like, 'You should not go in this direction'. Others may be oppositional. Both ways are not good; they should be impartial.

When I mentioned that surely, some stations have signed contracts with the state, he added:

Whether they may have signed contracts or not, you should at least allow our statements. I am calling in to raise actual problematic issues. It's not a propaganda for either side. (Cotonou, October 2020)

Ramanou Gbadamassi added,

At the end of Yayi Boni's term in office and immediately after the election of President Patrice Talon, we as *grogneurs* had it quite easy. But now, many of us are feeling pressure; some have even been sued for possible defamation. This worries some callers, and fewer critical voices are heard today. Conversely, there are certainly less blunders than before. (Abomey-Calavi, August 2023)

To conclude this chapter, the *grogneurs* are still confronted with prejudgements by some listeners. Nevertheless, benevolent perceptions of their activities, due to their ability to discuss pertinent problems easily, prevail and provide them with a firm position in the meantime. The authorities are surely curious to hear these statements, yet they do not often like to respond to the respective challenges.

Furthermore, the relationship between the *grogneurs* and journalists can be discussed from the viewpoint of their divergent interests. Indeed, both groups of actors aim to strengthen their networks of information and maintain their positions rather than blurring the boundaries between media professionals and media activists. Moreover, unlike the situation in other African countries, being a *grogneur* does not provide a prerequisite for pursuing another career path, including those in politics. Being a *grogneur* requires assuming the role in its own right. These findings are further elucidated on and linked to theoretical considerations in the subsequent chapter.

*Figure 8: I. Sanda N'gobi, grogneur, Perma, August 2024.*



Source: Author