

Tilo Grätz

Voice and Publics in West African Radio

Grogneurs
as Media Activists
in Bénin

[transcript] Media Studies

Tilo Grätz
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[transcript]

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I dedicate this book to my late father, Horst Grätz (1931–2026).

Contents

Acknowledgments 9

Abstract 11

Introduction 13

The Central Idea of the Book: Investigating New Media Actors 13

Structure of the Book 16

Chapter I: Setting the Stage for *Grogneurs*

Media Structures and Technologies in Bénin 21

Research Background: Media Studies and Politics 21

A Brief History of Radio Broadcasting in Bénin 22

Media in Bénin between Censorship and Instrumentalisation 24

Investigating Participatory Media in Bénin 28

Chapter II: *La Grogne Matinal*

The Establishment of a Contentious Radio Show 35

Beginnings 35

Standards, Variations, and Schedules 37

Grogne Shows and Public Debates: Persistent Topics and News 43

Major scandals and national media events 49

Digression: *Radio Trottoir*, Mediatisation and *Grogne* Shows in Bénin 50

The Predominance of Frequent Callers 52

Grogne Shows, Media Policies, and Adaptations 53

Chapter III: <i>Grogne</i> Shows: Main Actors and Practices	63
Who Are the <i>Grogneurs</i> ? Profiles and Motives	63
Calling in Between Radio Messaging and Self-Positioning	66
From Hobby to Vocation: Inner Pressures and External Challenges	77
Careers, Constraints, and Risks	78
Call-in Practices between Communication Routines and Self-Techniques	81
Women as <i>Grogneuses</i>	83
Media appropriation, role-taking, and the public positionin of <i>grogneurs</i>	86
Hosts and Their Dilemmas: Journalists and Interactive Radio Shows	89
Chapter IV: On-Air Performances	95
Calling in: Styles and Strategies	95
Getting Attention: Staging and Rhetoric Strategies	97
Insertion: <i>Grogneurs</i> in Changing Economies of Attention	105
<i>Grogne</i> Shows as a Drama	110
Chapter V: <i>Grogneurs</i> in Changing Media Environments	113
<i>Grogneurs</i> in Bénin: Comparative Aspects	113
Strategies for Procuring Information	115
Social Media and Opinion-Making in Bénin Today	120
Everyday Relationships Between <i>Grogneurs</i> and Journalists	122
<i>Grogne</i> Shows and Public Communication	131
<i>Grogneurs</i> , Listeners, and Administrative Authorities	132
Friendship and Competition: Relationships Between <i>Grogneurs</i>	138
Remunerations	142
The COVID-19 Crisis and Role-Taking	144
<i>Grogneurs</i> and Politics	146
Changes and Adaptations	147
Chapter VI: Intermediations	151
Information Brokerage: Theorising the Role of <i>Grogneurs</i> in Bénin	151
<i>Grogneurs</i> as media activists	157
Chapter VII: Conclusion	159
References	163

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*Figure 1: Sébastien Gnonhossou, tailor,
Cotonou, April 2025.*



Source: Author

Abstract

This book examines the role of new media actors in the West African Republic of Bénin, commonly referred to as *grogneurs* or *faiseurs d'opinion*. These are frequent callers to interactive radio shows that openly discuss politics and society in contemporary Bénin. I argue that it is too simplistic to define them as 'citizen journalists.' Instead, we need to adopt a more complex analysis of their position within new configurations of the public sphere(s) shaped by a wide range of actors, interests, practices, and technologies. The book focuses mainly on a series of radio call-in shows, commonly called *grogne* in Bénin, where listeners can speak freely and directly about current issues or denounce grievances, using the radio as the subcontinent's still most predominant mass medium. It is evident that these programmes have become the primary platform through which these *grogneurs* express themselves. Their success is being significantly boosted by the increasing ease of access to mobile phones, and their enduring reputation for veracity and reliability. My book is a perfect case in point to demonstrate the pivotal role of central media actors, such as the *grogneurs*, which can be seen as information brokers. As media activists, they capitalise on the enabling potential of new media technologies and social media, which unfold their full potential in the Republic of Bénin when closely intertwined with more 'traditional' media such as radio and press. From a performative approach, the analysis of *grogne* shows and *grogneurs'* interventions should be conceptualised as a media ritual and a drama, which follows specific scripts and includes typical rhetoric, interaction rituals, verbal and indirect means of communication.

Figure 2: Sébastien Gnonhossou, tailor, Cotonou, July 2022.



Source: Author

Introduction

The Central Idea of the Book: Investigating New Media Actors

[Caller:] ‘*Bonjour, Monsieur le Journaliste*, this is Hermann Méton from Vêdoko!’ [Alassane Sanni, Host:] ‘*Bonjour!*’ [Caller:] ‘Yesterday, around 12, I saw people from the national police on a control mission in downtown Cotonou, but it seems that they had stopped various motorcyclists with a pretext, without a reason. They took money from them, certainly without paying it into the state coffers. This kind of action should be sanctioned!’ [Host:] ‘You have exceeded your time on air!’ ‘Ok, goodbye’ (Rec. from Golfe FM, *La grogne matinal*, 6.3.2018, 6:35 am).¹

This extract is from a phone call to a private radio station in Cotonou, the largest city in the Republic of Bénin. This call was part of an extraordinarily successful programme, which has been aired for a long time every morning by Golfe FM at 6:30 am. It is called *La grogne matinal* (‘Morning anger’). Callers² may complain about current problems in public life and about any bad experiences they have had with municipal services. They may also voice critical comments about the radio programme. Usually, callers have about 90 seconds to make their statements. This strict timeframe is intended to allow many other callers to chime in.

La grogne matinal is quite an illustrious show (*émission phare*), which numerous radio listeners tune into (i.e. frequent and occasional listeners), ‘ordinary’ citizens and politicians alike, as well as administrative authorities. At times, it has even been banned by media authorities due to its potential for abuse. While

1 All translations from French are mine.

2 My analysis applies to all genders, unless declared otherwise. For the role of female frequent callers, the *grogneuses*, see Chapter III, p.83.

it has often been suspended during presidential and parliamentary elections, it has continued to exist.

Today, this broadcast format, ubiquitous throughout Bénin, has been adopted by almost all radio stations in the country under various titles. The programmes appeal to their audiences due to their originality and because they mediate between different communication styles and media actors in various locations. Thus, they connect listeners and radio producers in new ways.

The most fascinating aspect for me that sparked this research was the fact that almost 80% of all callers to such programmes are actually comprised of the same people. These people call radio stations almost daily, often several times a day. Most of them criticise defunct infrastructures and incompetent administrations. However, they also often denounce problems in political life, including corruption (Aihou 2001). In most cases, these callers are well known to journalists, politicians, and the general public in Bénin while maintaining close contact with each other.

Throughout the country, these callers are commonly known as *grogneurs*, deriving their appellation from the name of the above-mentioned and most famous interactive radio show *La grogne matinal* (Grätz 2024). This book uses both 'frequent callers' and '*grogneurs*,' yet the latter is more widespread and specific to the Bénin case. Another frequent moniker is *faiseurs d'opinion* (opinion-makers)³. Thus, this book focuses on the media practices (Bräuchler and Postill 2010; Helle-Vale 2016) of *grogneurs* and their effect on the public sphere(s) in Bénin at large.

What are the reasons for the dominance and success of these *grogneurs*? What are their motives, and what distinguishes them from other listeners and callers to radio stations? To what extent do their interventions shape the media landscape in Bénin today? Given their specific activist role and their preference for public affairs and political issues, can they be labelled 'citizen journalists' (Blaagaard 2018; Campbell 2015; Ajao 2021; Ogola/Owuor 2016; Banda 2010; Bruijn 2016; Bruijn et al. 2025)? To answer these questions, I aim to examine how frequent callers, the *grogneurs*, co-produce and influence these interactive radio shows and discuss their position in public life.

The call-in shows addressing social issues, specifically the '*grogne* shows', certainly represent a participatory media format (Carpentier 2011). 'Participatory' refers to the ways in which audiences are involved in the co-production

3 Another name is "lanceurs d'alerte" (whistleblowers).

of media formats, which has taken on new meaning in studies on social media (Jenkins 2006) and the use of mobile communication technologies in sub-Saharan Africa (Mutsvairo 2016a; Matsilele /Mpofu/Moyo 2023). However, Carpentier opposes an overly broad use of the term media participation and distinguishes between access- and content-related (or ‘minimalist’) media participation typical of interactive programmes, and structural (or ‘maximalist’) media participation, such as the co-management of media institutions and decision-making processes (op.cit. 69). He further differentiates between various modes of media access, interaction, and participation (2015). I take stock of his groundbreaking work, including his caution against the overgeneralisation of the term, and ask about the dimensions of media participation for such active listeners, as well as its limits, both in terms of content production and unequal power relations between them and journalists.

To address these questions, I tried to explore the broader context of these call-in shows⁴. I analysed in depth several such participatory programmes on different radio stations by exploring their daily production within several stations and evaluated the positions of *grogneurs*, journalists, and regular listeners. The study mainly covered three regions of Bénin, the wider Cotonou area (Cotonou with 679,012 inhabitants and neighbouring Abomey-Calavi with 656,358), the northern metropolitan area of Parakou (255,478) and the northwestern regional centre Natitingou (103,843 inhabitants; all numbers are from the official census of 2013; INSTaD 2016), where I conducted intensive fieldwork to explore the motivations, and strategies of the key groups involved. I was interested in the relationships between frequent callers while also drawing attention to the often ambivalent relationships between the *grogneurs* and journalists, as well as the former’s relationships with public authorities.

Therefore, in this book, I argue that the success of the *grogne* shows is primarily due to the dramatised interplay between radio producers and frequent listeners: their ideas, motives, and skills in enlivening that talk radio programme. The *grogneurs* are important media activists in Bénin, as they are part of a broad movement committed to veracity and the transparency of public affairs. They are masters of attention management, so they are ultimately key information brokers – intermediaries operating in diverse, interconnected contemporary public spheres.

4 Research was supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG), grant GR-1724/12-1.

Structure of the Book

The book has a central cornerstone: the views of one outstanding *grogneur*, Sébastien Gnonhossou. These ideas are based on our numerous encounters and interviews over the last few years. Sébastien is one of the most active and inspiring voices in southern Bénin. He can also be seen as emblematic of a typical frequent caller who is deeply embedded in networks of information, social engagement, and adaptive strategies of communication both on and off the air. I met Sébastien for the first time in 2018. I visited him every day since then, whenever I came to Cotonou. Sometimes, I spent several days in his workshop in Missèbo. In addition, I heard his voice at home in Germany while listening to internet radio streams. We also exchanged numerous messages via messenger services. Sébastien Gnonhossou is one of the most prominent *grogneurs* in Bénin. His voice can be heard daily on at least one of the *grogne*-style shows, such as those broadcast by radio stations CAPP FM, Peace FM, and Radio Cotonou. He is a tailor. His workshop in the Missèbo district of Cotonou is a place of social exchange, where he meets customers, other *grogneurs* visit him, and where he gathers information. Sébastien's statements largely reflect observations about daily life in this neighbourhood and in Cotonou in general. Sébastien is interested in improving the living conditions in his community and beyond. He is often one of the first to open the call-in shows with his mostly clear but passionate phone calls.

Nevertheless, Sébastien is unafraid to frankly address sensitive topics. He regularly calls into the programmes of the state broadcaster Radio Bénin (a department of the state media house *Société de Radio et Télévision du Bénin* [SRTB, formerly ORTB], restructured in 2023; Degbetchi 2023) and often refers to corruption issues as well. Known for his quick wit, Sébastien⁵ is often invited to several radio stations as a guest to discuss politics or just to appear on more entertainment-oriented shows.

Together with some fellow *grogneurs*, Sébastien founded an NGO called *Amour Pour ma Patrie*. Its members mainly want to launch information campaigns for villagers using various means of communication. The association has an additional task, namely identifying problems such as non-operational infrastructures, which the members subsequently convert into *grogne* calls.

5 Personal names are used only if they were intentionally used in public (e.g. on call-in shows). Otherwise, I anonymised them. Spelling errors due to a single acoustic template are my responsibility.

Sébastien commutes between his home in Cotonou-Akpakpa, near the central slaughterhouse, and downtown Cotonou-Missèbo, where his workshop is located. Small vignettes of our pleasant encounters serve as a primer to several chapters of this book.

In addition to this introduction and the conclusion, the book is comprised of six main chapters. The first chapter, 'Setting the Stage for *Grogneurs*: Media Structures and Technologies in Bénin', examines the history, political culture, and structural and infrastructural conditions of radio broadcasting in the Republic of Bénin. In this respect, I argue that, unlike the economic giant and neighbour Nigeria, where TV and social media are much more advanced and numerous bloggers, vloggers, and influencers dominate the media, radio still holds its central role in Bénin. Its importance is further enhanced by the availability of mobile phones and the ensuing communication affordances, including interactive call-in radio shows.

In Chapter II, '*La Grogne Matinal*: The Establishment of a Contentious Radio Show', I investigate the background of interactive radio programmes in the context of recent developments in the field of radio broadcasting. I trace the initial development of *grogne* shows from the beginning and their establishment despite critical voices over the last 20 years. I describe different types of interactive radio programmes and their production before focusing on the main issues and debates triggered by and set on the public agenda by frequent callers.

The third chapter, '*Grogne Shows*: Main Actors and Practices', mainly centres on the principal protagonists of these shows: *grogneurs* and journalists. Herein, I develop a categorisation of *grogneurs* with ideal types, based on individual biographies and 'careers'. I highlight the considerable diversity of motives, practices, and interests that characterise them. The chapter also portrays frequent female callers.

The fourth chapter, '*On Air Performances*', examines how these interactive shows are set up, presented, and organised in detail. I argue that their success is related to their clearly established structure, which is known to most listeners and goes hand in hand with elaborate rules of communication, rhetoric, and the treatment of politically sensitive issues. This combination creates a kind of 'brand' that is necessary to preserve the place of such shows and the *grogneurs* in the changing economics of public attention.

In Chapter V, '*Grogneurs* in Changing Media Environments', I explore further explanations for the success of this genre and its main protagonists in other regions of the country. I analyse the *grogneurs*' modes of information pro-

curement and their use of social media. Subsequently, I focus on their networking strategies, their relations to journalists and the wider public, including fellow listeners and authorities, and their public position in Bénin today.

The sixth chapter, 'Intermediations', examines the roles of *grogneurs* in the context of current theoretical debates, specifically those concerning citizen journalism and participatory media in sub-Saharan Africa. Here, I argue that the roles of journalists and *grogneurs* rarely overlap, as all these actors tend to maintain the boundaries of their respective positions. Thus, the *grogneurs* should be viewed as 'information brokers' to highlight their mediating and pivotal role in the circuits of public communication. Thus, I advocate for a broader analysis, even beyond the discussion of media activists as agents of democratisation.

In Chapter VII, 'Conclusion', I summarise the main points of my book while outlining future research approaches, particularly regarding new technological developments.

My account of the role of *grogneurs*, journalists, and regular listeners is based on long-term field research and primarily qualitative methodological approaches. This study included numerous interviews with frequent callers, journalists, and media professionals (see in detail pp. 28 et seq.). In addition, I observed the *grogneurs* in their workplaces, homes, at radio stations (in the production studios and newsrooms), and at markets and other public places where people often listen to interactive radio shows. I also participated in meetings between journalists and *grogneurs*, and held various informal conversations at meeting points. Some took place at the once-famous stand *Kiosque de la morgue* (demolished in August 2025 due to road construction), a plentiful newspaper stall near the Central Hospital in Cotonou, a bar in the former Cinema Concorde, and other locations.

The book places great emphasis on content analysis, which was facilitated by the availability of livestream options, podcasts, and direct recordings on FM, as well as audio files obtained from radio stations or from *grogneurs* and their social media forums. Of course, various changes may have occurred between the completion of my on-site data collection in mid-2025 and the final publication of this book in terms of the media practises of radio stations (e.g. broadcasting schedules with interactive shows and livestream offers) and institutional developments (e.g. the suspension of radio stations), as well as by the conditions of individual interviewees. I intend to gradually publish these changes on my website.

What are the main theoretical and political contexts of my analysis of these *grogne* broadcasts?

Figure 3: Justin Sowadan, shop keeper and grogneur, Natitingou, July 2023.



Source: Author

Chapter I: Setting the Stage for *Grogneurs*

Media Structures and Technologies in Bénin

Research Background: Media Studies and Politics

Cotonou-Missèbo. Today, I am visiting Sébastien's small tailor workshop, named '*Soleil d'Or*' (Golden Sun), located in a neighbourhood known for its numerous stores and services related to the trades in fabric and second-hand clothing. His workshop is constructed mainly of bamboo and corrugated iron and contains three sewing machines with some chairs and tables covered with fabric, garments, and other materials. Sébastien tailors on demand for his clients with the assistance of two apprentices. A radio is playing in the background that provides music and information throughout the day. Sébastien's workshop is also the setting for his *grogne* phone calls during which he participates in interactive radio shows on current issues. He usually writes down his words before calling the respective station (2021–2025).

This vignette portrays Sébastien, the experienced *grogneur* whom I previously mentioned in the introduction to this book. He is a prime example of a frequent caller to interactive radio programmes (or call-in radio shows) in Bénin. Similar to those in other African countries, these call-in shows have flourished since the 1990s, alongside the waves of proliferation of state-independent media in many countries of the subcontinent, occasioned by political liberalisation (Frère 2016: 114.; Grätz 2012: pp. 433 et seq.) Sub-Saharan Africa saw an increasing pluralisation of media outlets (Hydén et al. 2002, M'Bayo/Onwumechili/Nwanko 2000, Nyamnjoh 2005; Njogu/Middleton 2009, Wasserman 2010), followed by the boom of the mobile phones and messenger services. These affordances have stimulated the active role of media users, especially in embracing participatory media formats on the subcontinent (Girard 2003, Banda 2010, Mutsvairo 2016a; Srinivasan/Diepeveen 2018). Triggers

have been the processes of media convergence (Willems 2010) and the digital turn in general (Moyo 2013; see also Mudhai/Tettey/Banda 2009).

Nevertheless, the debate on participatory media in Africa still oscillates between somewhat euphoric reports (Banda 2010) and more sceptical or realistic positions (Willems 2013). Especially in media development cooperation, several studies have applied an apparently normative perspective and envisioned participatory media as a straightforward element of political participation and, ultimately, the democratisation of society. Participatory media also encourage non-professional media users to regularly provide valuable information to the broader public. The overall affirmative perception of these media actors is largely associated with the aforementioned concepts of 'citizen journalism' and 'alternative journalism' (Atton/Hamilton 2015); concepts that my study aims to question (see in more detail in Chapter V, pp. 153 et seq.). However, I argue that such normative or simplified concepts allow only a limited analysis.

Moreover, my book addresses questions of media change at the interface between 'classical' (i.e. the radio) and 'new' (i.e. digital) media in Africa. My study thus analyses call-in radio shows, in an attempt to build a bridge between the now well-established field of radio studies (Fardon/Furniss 2000, Gunner/Ligaga/Moyo 2011, Grätz 2014b) and digital media: the mobile phone (Bruijn/Nyamnjoh/Brinkman 2009; Vokes 2018). My study underlines that interactive media also contribute to the increasing hybridity of media usages (Gagliardone 2016) in West Africa. Before addressing the central theme of the book and developing my arguments in detail, I briefly outline the emergence of radio broadcasting in the Republic of Bénin.

A Brief History of Radio Broadcasting in Bénin

With an area of 114,763 km², the former French colony of Dahomey (until 1975), now the *République du Bénin*, is a state in West Africa located between Nigeria and Togo. It has an official population of 14.6 million, characterised by ethnic and linguistic pluralism and a literacy rate of 51.4% (CIA 2025). The official language is French, the predominant *linguae francae* are Fongbé and Yoruba (with variants) in the southern part and Dendi in the north.

Bénin gained independence in August 1960. The civilian governments were followed by a military regime, with a socialist period until 1989 under the leadership of Mathieu Kérékou. However, economic crises and protest movements

led to political changes, which were initiated by a national conference in 1990. This transition paved the way for a more democratic constitution and a multi-party presidential system (Kohnert/Preuß 1992:6, Bierschenk 1995, Bako-Arifari 1995).

After the presidency of Mathieu Kérékou (1996–2006) followed by Thomas Boni Yayi (2006–2016), Patrice Talon, a business tycoon, was elected (Erlecke 2016) and re-elected in 2021 (under problematic circumstances, see Gänsler 2021). Talon will hold the presidency until April 2026, when the next presidential election is scheduled. Although the Republic of Bénin has been known in West Africa for its democratic opening and active civil society since 1990, it is now characterised by elements of autocratic governance (Kohnert/Preuß 2019; Duerksen 2019, 2021; Koter 2024), or, as some observers put it, a ‘wardship pluralism’ (*pluralisme sous tutelle*; Dione 2025). A coup attempt failed on December 7, 2025.

Talon launched an ambitious reform programme to modernise the country’s infrastructure, including the construction of modern markets, avenues, and tourist attractions while reorganising the education and legal sectors. He further propelled crucial economic sectors, which also motivated foreign investments (Stroh 2019; Lawson 2015). However, his policies were met with opposition from those who lost the elections, as well as NGOs and parts of the media, which accused him of authoritarian tendencies, Machiavellianism, and a lack of respect for the country’s political forces¹.

The most problematic event was the parliamentary elections in April 2019. A new electoral law introduced more rigid conditions for candidates and parties². This law also obliged all political parties to adhere to either one of the main political blocs (i.e. today’s *Bloc Républicain*, *Union Progressiste*, or *Les*

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- 1 Various political commentators have compared Patrice Talon’s governance with similar semi-autocratic presidents such as Paul Kagame in Rwanda, who have sought to reform and modernise their countries quickly in an authoritarian manner, see Gänsler (2019a).
 - 2 Loi n° 2018–31 du 03–09-2018 portant code électoral en République du Bénin. Until 2019, political parties were by and large enterprises of individual politicians based on regional affinities and clientelist networks, see Engels (2005) and Stroh (2014). Consequently, their number grew steadily, which opened up a constant game of changing alliances and electoral bets. Thus, the reform was initially welcomed by most voters. However, it required the acquisition of signatures from previously elected politicians and high bails for potential candidates for both the presidential and parliamentary elections. Electoral campaigns have continued to be expensive, so they have favoured wealthy participants, a trend that is prevalent throughout the region, see Koter (2017).

Démocrates), with the first two serving as advocates of the president's policies (*mouvance*). Intended to end the all-too-large spectre of political parties with numerous small parties, the law resulted in much controversy (Preuß 2019).

After the elections, violent protests broke out in Cotonou, Porto-Novo, and Tchaourou (Koter 2024). These protests, which were severely repressed by the security forces, led to several deaths and injuries (Gänsler 2019b) and, subsequently, a general crisis in the country. A conference that brought together most of the political parties proposed changes to the electoral law. Tensions eased somewhat after the legislative elections in January 2023, when *Les Démocrates*, an oppositional party in the true sense of the word, was accepted and won several seats (Laplace 2023). However, the majority of parliament mainly consisted of politicians who supported the government. Furthermore, formerly critical elites were either tacit, had been co-opted, or colluded with the presidential camp (Koter op.cit.). Important positions within the Constitutional Court and the Supreme Media Authority were filled with individuals close to the president, which allowed laws to be constantly tailored for stricter political control. Governance under Talon has nevertheless provoked controversy concerning issues such as the harsh evictions of informal settlers and the juridical persecution of oppositional politicians (Gänsler 2021) by the specialised court CRIET (*Cour de Répression des Infractions Économiques et du Terrorisme*).

Media in Bénin between Censorship and Instrumentalisation

When assessing the media system, radio remains the primary electronic mass medium in Bénin in terms of both the number of listeners and radio stations (Grätz 2014b, Assogba 2008). Although television has become increasingly significant, with terrestrial, satellite, and numerous internet channels available, 102 radio stations operate in various languages throughout the country (HAAC 2025), especially in principal urban areas such as Cotonou and Parakou.

In major cities, listeners can choose from a variety of stations. The national broadcaster provides programmes in 18 national languages and in French. Radio's prominent role in Bénin is, however, a more recent development. The first national radio service in the former colony of Dahomey, Radio Cotonou, began broadcasting in 1953. However, the state broadcaster in the (then-) Republic of Bénin took full swing in the 1970s, with the creation of

new broadcasting houses and radio programmes for listeners in rural areas (Saxer/Grossenbacher 1987).

Public mass media remained completely controlled by the central state, especially during the socialist period between 1972 and 1989. However, after the political changes in 1990, a new constitution allowed a greater freedom of expression. As a result, many independent newspapers emerged (Frère 2000; Campbell 1998; Adélakoun 2008; Frère 1996; Adjovi 2023).

In 1995, the first community radio stations were installed (Grätz 2010; Da Matha 1995; Edah 2002; Grätz 2003; 2009; Mamadou 2008; N'Tcha 2008). New media laws in 1997³ then enabled the establishment of state-independent radio and TV stations (ODEM 2001). Since then, there have been several waves of licensing of broadcasters by the Supreme Media Authority HAAC (*Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication*)⁴. Among them are private⁵, religious, associative and community radio stations⁶. These stations usually offer a wide range of programmes, which provide information, entertainment, advice and news.

Interactive (call-in) shows, further driven by the mobile phone boom since 2000, are particularly popular with listeners, as are press reviews, quiz shows, and political debates. Media conversion enables the broader dissemination of information and often leads to cultural revival (Loubegnon 2023). The media field in Bénin also encompasses a vibrant film industry and numerous production companies. Some private media houses comprise several media, including (web-) TV and radio stations. These enable synergies and a larger investment in media infrastructure, as well as greater professionalism. Nevertheless, the editorial line of various private media is not independent of those who sponsor its existence (e.g. politicians and businesspeople).

Furthermore, the once-flourishing newspaper landscape (Frère 2000) has shrunk considerably, mainly due to an increasing shift towards purely online publications and online advertisements. Previous state subventions have been suspended. A few journals still uphold the standard of quality journalism (e.g.

3 Law 97–010 of August 20, 1997 on the liberalisation of the media.

4 For the institutional framework of broadcasting in the Republic of Bénin cf. Adjovi (2001); (2003), Bardelli-Danieli (2001), La Brosse/Frère (2012), Grätz (2010), Carlos and Djogbénou (2005) and Assogba (2008).

5 Most private stations generate their budgets from advertisements, see Grätz (2013).

6 Since 2000, most community and associative radio stations have joined together in the FERCAB (Fédération des Radios Communautaires et Assimilées).

Le Potentiel and *La Nouvelle Tribune*) and complement the comprehensive online news platform *Banouto*.

Despite the plurality of the media system in Bénin, the bold development of media and journalism there is still hampered by economic constraints (Guèdègbé 2020), direct and indirect forms of censorship (Grätz 2015a, *Reporters sans frontières* 2022), and governmental control (Friedrich- Ebert-Stiftung 2022). Censorship in Bénin encompasses a wide range of interventions and measures designed to shape the activities of journalists, including more direct interventions (e.g. lawsuits against media outlets and journalists) and indirect strategies (e.g. intimidating phone calls and bribing critical journalists to tame their output). In this regard, the country has seen both indirect control or soft censorship (Podesta 2009), already starting between 2006 and 2016 under President Boni (Grätz 2015a), and judicial censorship.

The role of the Supreme Media Authority, HAAC (Adjovi 2003a), is indeed ambiguous. While it helps raise the standards of media production and provides a necessary watchdog position to indict any apparent abuses of the media, it does not apply the same standards since it favours governmental media, above all, the TV department of the state media house, SRTB. Moreover, many of its decisions are disproportionate, such as the suspension of entire media companies (Koter 2024:217), which happened in 2018, when the critical private daily newspaper *La Nouvelle Tribune* was temporarily banned (*Reporters sans frontières* 2018; BBC 2018b), and in August 2023, when the same measure was imposed on the media house *La Gazette du Golfe*, which is still suspended (Gnan-sounou/Édouard 2023; Tchobo 2023)⁷.

Furthermore, as early as 2019, the licence of Radio Soleil FM, a major opposition and news-oriented radio station, was revoked on a formal pretext (Radio France International 2019).

The HAAC monitors all licensed media outlets, whereas individual faults (e.g. defamation on social networks) are directly sanctioned by the special court CRIET. Even for minor offences, journalists have been sentenced to prison (e.g. Ignace Sossou in 2020, *Le Monde avec AFP* 2020) or have been required to pay substantial fines (e.g. Virgile Ahouansé in 2023, Houndjo 2023). Especially the internet law (*code du numérique*), firstly issued in 2017, provides

7 The reason for this act was apparently an editorial that commented positively on the coup d'état in Niger at the end of July 2023, which the government condemned. The HAAC suspended the entire media house and ordered the freezing of all bank accounts, olofofo (2023).

for harsh penalties sanctioning alleged offences (Guézodjè 2020). For instance, a critical blogger recently received a two-year imprisonment sentence by the CRIET (RFI 2025; US Department of State 2025). The current HAAC administration also widely utilises formal bureaucracy, with the argument to ‘clean up’ the media field. In this vein, the exclusion of journalists or outlets is most often related to the required renewal of press cards, or contracts for exploiting frequencies and printing newspapers, as well as for websites, WebTV, and news portals, which may be hampered at this moment.

However, at the end of February 2023, several new stations began broadcasting, including Radio Cotonou, a non-profit station run by the municipal administration of that town, and BIP Radio, a private broadcaster founded by the experienced journalist Jean-Luc Aplogan. Radio Cotonou focusses on proximity to its listeners and proposes many everyday companion programmes, while BIP Radio is largely conceptualised as a 24-hour news and information-oriented station (advertising slogan: *La première chaîne d'information en continue au Bénin*). In both cases, great care is taken to avoid the mistakes of other stations. With a solid source of funding, these stations aim to be independent of the central government.

From their onset, both stations produced various call-in programmes, including those of the *grogne* type, which are hosted by experienced journalists. These are, in Cotonou, Benjamin Honoré Nahum (Radio Cotonou) and Rachida Houssou (BIP Radio), as well as Firmin Kassaga (Peace FM) and Philibert Abibou (Radio CAPP FM). Their stations compete for listeners while trying to sharpen their respective profiles. For example, BIP Radio offers many background reports, including those on foreign policy issues, while Radio Cotonou provides its listeners with call-in programmes on family issues every morning.

Few truly independent stations, such as Radio CAPP FM and BIP Radio, or the web-based broadcaster Crystal News⁸ in Porto-Novo, operate within the narrow limits of legitimate criticism. Consequently, Bénin has effectively fallen to 92nd place on the World Press Freedom Index (Reporters without borders 2025). Most journalists still strive to acquire greater professionalism by minimising incorrect or commissioned information. In this respect, the journalists' association UPMB (*Union des Professionnelles des Médias du Bénin*) offers training sessions and advice.

8 Crystal News, founded by journalist Virgile Ahouansé (formerly at Radio Soleil). Currently suspended for formal reasons (10/2025).

Rounding out the picture are three current (2025) large mobile phone companies (i.e. MTN, Moov, and CELTIS), some of which have international shareholders⁹. The telecommunications authority ARCEP (*Autorité de Régulation des Communications Électroniques et de la Poste*) monitors this sector. The dominant messenger service is WhatsApp, which is widely used in the country, along with social networks such as Facebook and Instagram.

Investigating Participatory Media in Bénin

Let us return to the introduction of this book to remind ourselves of its main purpose. I aim to focus on interactive radio shows and discuss the role of the main actors involved, especially the frequent callers to these shows in Bénin, known as *grogneurs*. What are their practices and interactions with other media actors, such as journalists and the general public? How can we determine their position within new information circuits in the country, which are shaped by the proliferation of digital media?

To answer these questions, I conducted field research in Bénin, mainly using qualitative methods (Pype/Jedlowski 2019). My intermittent fieldwork in Bénin spanned over a period of six years. Due to personal constraints, I had to divide my research into various shorter field stays mainly between 2018 and 2025 (22 months in total), which allowed me to follow several *grogneurs* and their activities over a longer time span.

Thus, most insights were derived from numerous formal and informal encounters with listeners, journalists, media experts, and media authorities on various occasions. It is impossible to list them all¹⁰. Informal talks are often

9 In 2025, there were 4.71 million internet users, and online penetration stood at 32.2%. Mobile connections raised up to 16.7 million; equivalent to 114% of the total population (when totalling all kinds of related services) Bénin had 2.40 million social media user identities, which is 16.4 percent of the total population; as of August 2025, see Kemp (2025). A total of 25.3% on average of all households had a TV, with 46% in the southern Atlantic department against 21% in the northern Atakora department; as of 2016, see Smits (2016). I could not find any recent data about the number of radio sets.

10 Interview data and memos from observations are filed in my personal archives. References to these (i.e. 'personal information') indicate the name, month, year, and place. All translations from local French (or from intermediary translations in local Fongbé or Dendi, with the help of local friends) are mine, when not differently referenced. AI was used to correct my English grammar.

less structured than formal interviews, but they are most often a cornerstone of qualitative fieldwork, as documented in my notebooks.

Based on semi-open questionnaires, I had the opportunity to talk to *grogneurs* of various categories (a total of 60 and in diverse locations: 15 in Natitingou, 15 in Parakou, and 30 in the Cotonou area). In most cases, the *grogneurs* readily gave me the phone numbers of fellow *grogneurs* to contact them for further interviews. I mostly worked in French, but I also conducted eight interviews in Fongbé and Dendi (or bilingually), assisted by local helpers and friends as translators. This approach could have limited the scope of my study, but it was consistent with the language of the majority of the *grogne* shows.

Furthermore, I interviewed journalists who hosted interactive radio shows (20 in Cotonou, eight in Parakou, and five in Natitingou), as well as frequent listeners to these shows (70) at various places (20 in Natitingou, 20 in Parakou, and, above all, 30 in the Cotonou area). This tableau of formal interviews was complemented by expert interviews with representatives of journalist associations in Bénin (five), media experts and scientists (eight), as well as governmental authorities (10). Here, I also integrated quantitative elements (concerning the central features of the *grogneurs*). The main findings are expressed as tendencies, as exact numbers may create a false impression of precision.

Finally, seven larger group discussions were held, three in Cotonou with *grogneurs* and journalists, and one in Parakou, as well as three in Natitingou with members of listeners' clubs where *grogneurs* dominate. Interviews with 'regular' listeners aimed at evaluating their habits of radio listening, their appreciation of *grogne* shows, and the *grogneurs* in particular. Moreover, observations were made at various radio stations during the production of these programmes or during editorial meetings. In some cases, I was invited to be a studio guest and participate in call-in shows (mainly *Tribune libre*, Radio CAPP FM, Cotonou, and *L'invité de la semaine*, Radio Nanto, Natitingou), which helped to augment a certain confidence among the *grogneurs* when later encountering them during individual discussions.

The major sites of my fieldwork represent a larger, densely populated metropolitan area in the south, a mid-sized regional administrative and economic centre in the north, and a provincial town that profits from tourism and trade as it expands into a mid-sized town. The first and far more important region of my study spans from Cotonou to the neighbouring areas, where numerous radio stations, including the national broadcaster and the

mentioned private stations, operate, thus encompassing Porto-Novo, Godomey, and Abomey-Calavi.

Parakou, the third-largest city in Bénin, is primarily a trading centre, as well as an important administrative centre. Here, listeners tune into the national broadcaster, Radio Bénin, and its regional affiliate, Radio Parakou, as well as several private stations with large audiences (see below) or community stations, such as Deeman FM. One popular station is Radio Arzèkè, which takes its name from the city's large central market. At the same time, Radio Fraternité (*Groupe de Presse Fraternité*) and Urban FM (*Groupe de Presse le Matinal*) are regional outlets of larger media houses.

Radio Arzèkè FM, broadcasting in French and national languages, was established as a private radio station; however, it operates closely with local populations, particularly in the central neighbourhoods of Parakou. Despite its limited technical equipment, Radio Arzèkè FM is marked by credible audiences and experienced journalists who produce critical news and development-oriented programmes (Assoc ONG/Gispert 2016).

In Natitingou, a municipality in northwestern Bénin, an administrative and market centre and tourist hotspot of the country near the Atakora Mountains, listeners can listen to the local Radio Nanto, a community radio station. In that area, superregional broadcasters, such as RFI, Radio Parakou and Radio Kara (Northern Togo), also reach out.

Often, I have taken the time to visit frequent callers in their communities to better understand the salience of their worries. For example, I visited a *grogneur*, Valentin Ayonou, in his neighbourhood Tchònvì on the shores of Lake Nokoué, where I witnessed problematic sewage and road construction in an area prone to recurring flooding (Tchònvì, 7.4.2023). Similarly, I accompanied *grogneur* Vierin Hounigbo to visit the primary school in his home village of Fonkounmè, a school lacking closure, despite being menaced by repeated thefts (Fonkounmè, 28.03.2024).

Furthermore, I conducted content analysis, including off-site methods of research (i.e. analysing recordings and internet livestreams of interactive shows)¹¹. In general, social media helped me establish and sustain many contacts, as most *grogneurs* and journalists use it. I was also accepted to join discussion groups (on WhatsApp), mainly comprised of listeners' clubs,

11 All audio files and transcripts I analysed stemmed from my personal recordings and archives. I usually specify the day, programme, and channel. Since podcast offerings usually disappear after some time, I did not provide the URL.

and I followed discussion threads on Facebook pages¹². Some *grogneurs* and journalists were particularly helpful in exchanging relevant information, transferring recorded interventions and whole *grogne* shows, documents, as well as information on current events.

Finally, the introduction of livestreaming by increasing radio stations has enabled me to listen from Germany and to record broadcasts whenever possible. However, I propose not discussing all methodological issues in detail here. Throughout the book, various ethnographic samples (e.g. transcripts of observations and conversations) are used to illustrate my findings and contextualise them. Thereby, these elements may better convey the fieldwork process.

At this point, I want to insert some preliminary remarks about certain 'sensitive issues' in my research: the veracity of the *grogneurs*' statements, as well as aspects of their motifs. Portraying individual *grogneurs* and their comments during phone calls to radio stations, based on samples and case studies, was part of a general endeavour to understand the pertinence of these interactive programmes and the position of their main actors in general. Consequently, this book is not intended to be an investigative report.

All *grogneurs* operate in an extensive continuum of truly diverse motives and practices (see Chapters III and V). Therefore, I report on their attitudes, including those of a few individuals who, for whatever reason, do not enjoy a good reputation. However, I refrain from any bare assumptions of probable 'hidden' intentions, which are beyond the central aims and scope of my work. Moreover, I am not in a position to prove whether every statement is ultimately true or false, nor can I really verify instances of manipulability of individual *grogneurs* (see Otchoun 2005). I include such information in a broader evaluation of the public position of *grogneurs* in Bénin today and the general social meaning of their statements.

The vast majority of *grogneurs* I have met have started to call in to radio shows out of a passion, a strong desire to contribute to public debates, and the aim of investing their personalities. Given that the freedom of expression is currently at stake in Bénin, verbal pressure may also affect media activists who are consequently frightened. All these problematic issues are part of a shifting field of political positioning that defines the interactions between all media actors in Bénin today.

12 Today, most FM broadcasters provide livestreams via an integrated media player on a website or apps such as ZENO, and recordings of selected shows on platforms such as YouTube, SoundCloud, and Facebook.

To this point, I outlined the general situation of the media in the Republic of Bénin and the history of radio broadcasting in the country. Hence, let us return to the evolution of these *grogne* radio programmes within the Béninese media context from the outset. In the following chapter, I describe the background and development of this radio genre in Bénin, its current form, and the primary debates and conflicts surrounding its success in the country.

Figure 4: Tranquilin Wantori, journalist at Radio Nanto, Natitingou, August 2025.



Source: Author

Chapter II: *La Grogne Matinal*

The Establishment of a Contentious Radio Show

'I'm sorry, I have to interrupt our conversation', Sébastien apologised, turning up the volume on the radio in his tailor's workshop. 'I can't miss that show', he later explained. Did he want to listen to other *grogneurs*? 'Yes, I want to know what they are up to'. Later, he added,

I started listening to these programmes 25 years ago on Golfe FM, and later on other stations. I began participating by calling in, although back in the day, it was more expensive. Some people even used telephone boxes, just before mobile phones became affordable. I know most of the presenters who were on air then and now. (Cotonou, 3 April 2023)

Beginnings

After 1997, the private media sector in Bénin underwent significant expansion, giving rise to new genres and production techniques that profoundly altered the Béninese media landscape. This transformation was driven by younger radio professionals who drew inspiration from Euro-American models. At that time, Radio Golfe FM, Radio Planète, Océan FM and CAPP FM were particularly successful. Additionally, the national state broadcasters, Radio Bénin, Radio Atlantic FM, and Radio Parakou, integrated new broadcasting formats. These included interactive radio programmes, call-in shows, discussions on family and sexuality (Grätz 2014a), political debates, and quiz shows. During certain call-in shows, listeners could now openly and directly address pertinent matters in public life.

These shows quickly gained popularity in both French and local languages and attracted many participants. Callers raised a wide range of issues, includ-

ing poor infrastructure, dirty roads, and complaints about ineffective public services. They also evoked sensitive topics such as corruption and abuse of administrative power.

The first such *grogne* show was launched in Bénin in 1998 by the private broadcaster Golfe FM¹. That show, called '*La grogne matinal*', ran until the station was banned in August 2023. Ambitious radio presenters, led by the journalist Jérôme Kassa (later at Soleil FM), Franck Alain Dotou, and Fréjus Quénou, were among the first to develop such a show. Later, journalists such as Benjamin Nahum (today at Radio Cotonou), Rodrigue Guézodjè (today at Deutsche Welle), and Peggy Ludovic Dagba (later at Radio Diaspora, cf. p. 148) continued in their footsteps to host these shows.

The initial purpose was to capture the audience's attention at 6:30 a.m., just before the station's 7 a.m. news began. The historic morning call-in show, *La grogne matinal*, was influenced by American models that had previously integrated call-in segments in the 1930s (Levin 1987), as well as in France. An important reference was the daily morning show *Appels sur l'actualité*, which the French international broadcaster Radio France International (RFI) introduced in the mid-1990s (Frere 2011)².

In Bénin, callers who manage to connect with a station during such shows may discuss critical comments on daily issues and societal scandals (Yabi 2003). Each caller must provide their full name and is allotted a specific time limit on the air, ranging from 90 seconds to 2 minutes. Here is an example:

My name is Djossè Gervais. I am calling from Yémicodji. The road that traverses the lake in my neighbourhood is in a poor condition and requires

1 A precursor to these interactive programs, in the broadest sense, were greeting-and-request programmes (concerts d'auditeurs), inspired by European models, see Grätz (2000). They were successful because they were broadcast in local languages. Contributions from listeners initially came in the form of letters and later, after 1990, increasingly through telephone calls. All these shows are now much easier to produce due to the ubiquity of mobile phone calls. Presenters sometimes also read messages from their mobile phones or computer screens on the air. Listeners can also use WhatsApp to contact their FM stations.

2 For the morning show *Appels sur l'actualité*, callers from any African country can express their opinions on current political issues. People are often called back to minimise their phone costs. The website of the show features podcasts of previous editions. BBC Africa offers such a show in both French or English during the audio programme 'Focus on Africa'.

repair. During the rainy season, the road is inundated, and school children must traverse the water to reach their school. (Recorded: Atlantic FM, 12.9.2018, 9.05)

Grogne can be translated as ‘angry grumble’, ‘expressing anger’, or a kind of ‘nagging’. Callers can use this airtime to raise multiple topics at once (*préoccupations*)³. In most cases, hosts only provide moderate intervention or commentary. They may summarise statements and add accurate information, but their primary responsibility is to prevent defamation or false accusations. Callers are not allowed to refer directly to individuals and must provide evidence for any serious allegations.⁴

Subsequently, other stations in the Cotonou–Porto-Novo region adopted this format, including Radio Planète, Océan FM, and CAPP FM. *Grogne* shows rapidly gained popularity throughout the country, and today, nearly all Béninese radio listeners are familiar with this type of radio programme. A group of steady callers quickly formed around these shows (Assogba 2012b), so these frequent callers have consequently become known as *grogneurs* (which translates as ‘grumblers’ or ‘complainers’).

At present, the genre has become a staple on the broadcast schedules of almost all radio stations in Bénin. The model has been met with success throughout sub-Saharan Africa, as evidenced by reports from Ghana (Selormey 2012; Nunoo 2015)⁵, Sénégal (Sonko 2010), Kenya, Uganda (Brisset 2009, Brisset 2011), DR Congo (Lokendandjala Okonda 2012), and South Africa (Bosch 2010; Hungbo 2011), as well as in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Standards, Variations, and Schedules

Although the original formula of the *grogne* shows is certainly the most widespread, other participatory programmes exist during which listeners can call in to a radio station, for instance, during political debates with studio guests. These guests may include members of civil society, political analysts,

3 Later, Golfe FM allowed frequent callers to intervene every second day only to widen the range of callers.

4 On Planète FM, for instance, the show usually starts with a reminder: ‘You cannot accuse someone without providing evidence to the radio station.’

5 In Ghana, talk radio was introduced earlier than in Bénin, especially by private broadcasters in urban areas; Tettey (2011).

or MPs who engage in dialogue with both hosts and listeners (e.g. *Décryptage*, Radio CAPP FM; *Cartes sur tables*, Océan FM; *90 minutes pour convaincre*, Radio Bénin; *Franc parler*, Radio Cotonou). During the call-in segments of these debates, multiple questions from listeners are often combined before participants are allowed to respond individually.

When comparing these types of shows, differences can be found in terms of typical topics, broadcasting practices (i.e. whether they are also broadcast simultaneously on TV or as podcasts), their place in the broadcaster's programming schedule, and the choice of guests. Some programmes adhere to the 'pure' *grogne* type, which is open to any topics and all callers, with minimal interference from the presenter. In contrast, other programmes typically concentrate on a specific topic and stir dialogue between a host and a caller. Further variations refer to the show's character, whether it is broadcast live or pre-recorded, as well as the frequency of these variations.

For example, shows such as *Allô BIP* (BIP Radio), *À vous l'antenne* (Peace FM) and *Parole aux citoyens* (Radio Cotonou) are aired almost daily throughout the week, while others have only one slot within the weekly programme schedule. Hence, the participation of their listeners differs significantly.

Some programmes allow more time for direct calls. *Allô BIP*, for instance, concedes most individual callers ample time to explain their problems in detail. As a result, some established *grogneurs* judge that programme to be unfavourable, as they then no longer find a chance to gain airtime. In other cases, however, moderators simply read out comments received via social media that were not broadcast directly. Radio Cotonou and Radio Bénin often prefilter calls with the help of studio technicians who first receive the calls. They ask about the topics to be discussed and take down callers' names before allowing them to intervene in the ongoing programme.

In contrast to other formats, some interactive shows operate with a more discussion-related modus, preferring to focus on specific topics suggested by the presenter. Examples of these shows include *Tribune libre* on Radio CAPP FM (Saturday mornings at 8 a.m., mainly hosted by Philibert Abibou) and *Échos de l'actualité* on Radio Bénin (most often hosted by Serge Ayaka or Henri N'Dah Sékou), both in Cotonou. These shows usually propose one or several main current topics (*sujets de l'actualité* or *les faits marquants de la semaine*) for debate, most often introduced by appropriate summaries of previous news reports, statements by politicians, or elements from the station's news coverage (including interviews or speeches). These topics may also cover current events (e.g. serious accidents, rainfall, a minister's press conference, or the start of a new

school year) as well as campaigns (e.g. the need to register motorcycles and the performance of the national football team). In these formats, callers are asked to refer strictly to those proposed topics and to avoid any digression. Radio CAPP FM is known for proposing controversial topics for talk show debates. In other cases (such as the show *Opinions* on Radio Planète), the topic is, however, chosen by the host to direct opinion-making accordingly, often aligning with the political positioning of the radio station—for example, to discuss a (rather positive) decision by the government.

During the weekday shows *Échos de l'actualité* broadcast by Radio Bénin, callers are encouraged to refer to each other and have the opportunity to respond to the comments of others.

Discussion-oriented shows involve more reactions from the host, or, when applicable, from a studio guest, who comments on the callers' opinions while adding additional or contradicting arguments. In one case, Atlantic FM (today's Kiff FM, an offspring of Radio Bénin and part of the state broadcasting house SRTB) produced a live show that presented several *grogneurs* directly to a panel of discussants. It was a conference call hosted by the experienced radio journalist Samuel Elijah every Monday morning after the 9:00 a.m. news (which was suspended after his retirement).

Several stations announce these topics in advance so that callers can be better focused and prepared. They also do so via Facebook posts read during the show, for instance during the already mentioned weekday show *Échos de l'actualité*, aired by Radio Bénin. Here, hosts steer the discussion while preventing verbal abuse and defamation. The show usually deals with a current topic (e.g., police controls to ensure the obligation to wear a helmet) and receives calls from different parts of Bénin, while most are from the south. The host typically discusses issues with callers and proposes an alternative view.

As increasingly more radio stations have utilised the internet as a supplementary means to broadcast and disseminate information, *grogne* shows have also become accessible to listeners via livestreams. Currently (2025), these livestreams are offered by almost all radio stations in Bénin, including Radio Bénin, Radio Parakou, Radio CAPP FM, Radio Cotonou, and BIP Radio Cotonou, and are mostly accessed on Facebook or YouTube (e.g. Océan FM, *Cartes sur table*, on Sunday mornings and CAPP FM, *Décryptage*, on Monday mornings). Livestream broadcasting allows far-remote listeners, including expatriate listeners (e.g. students, businesspeople, and emigrants with strong ties back home), to intervene in such shows, which is, however, not often the case. To enable internet broadcasting on a usable level, most radio stations

employ or contract webmasters, while some stations also try to broadcast these shows live on Facebook. Furthermore, some radio stations also publish podcast files of select radio shows on their websites (e.g. Radio Bénin and CAPP FM). In some cases, however, the time slot allotted to callers to discuss with eminent studio guests on debate shows is edited and does not appear in the podcast version.

Stations such as Radio Parakou or Radio Cotonou offer specific Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups where listeners can post individual messages. An example is the show *Nasuba*, established by journalists from Radio Parakou, the regional outlet of the national broadcaster. *Nasuba* was promoted by then-editor-in-chief, Habib Soumanou (who assumed the position of station director from August 2019 until April 2025). Listeners are welcome to participate in a discussion (currently at 9:05 a.m.) on a particular subject (excluding Fridays, when the discussion is typically left open). The topic of the upcoming show is announced on the show's Facebook page at least one day in advance, along with the call-in numbers. The page also serves as an additional platform for sharing ideas and is utilised by both listeners and individuals interested in these topics, even if they are unable to listen live on the air (Parakou, July 2023)⁶. Radio Fraternité, a private and well-established station that also broadcasts in Parakou, produces a similar show on weekdays at 8:00 a.m. entitled *Question du jour*.

As my interviews with listeners in different regions of the country show, audience interest in political debates varies, of course, across social and age groups. However, politically sound shows are available nationwide in many different languages.

Grogne elements have also been featured in press reviews during the weekday morning programmes of Radio Soleil FM, which have been partially produced live at the newsstand *Kiosque de la morgue* in the centre of Cotonou⁷. Stations such as Radio CAPP FM and Radio Cotonou make a conscious effort to broadcast these programmes in Béninese languages as well. For instance, CAPP FM⁸ airs *grogne* shows in Fongbé, Gungbé, Adja, Yoruba, and French

6 Such parallel internet or mobile media platforms are often temporary offers only, as they depend on individuals and their services.

7 Suspended due to the closure of the station (February 2020; Reporters without borders (2019).

8 The station's founder, the experienced journalist and writer Jérôme Carlos, always maintained his independence and was a role model for many journalists in Bénin. He passed away in January 2024. 'We dare to do something here', he described as the spirit of the station in Cotonou, December 2023.

from Monday to Friday at 9:00 a.m. (see Appendix). Moreover, during his interactive shows, the host, Philibert Abibou, frequently allows callers to speak in either Fongbé or Gungbé. Sometimes, they switch between French and these languages within the same statement. Abibou argues that this allowance is more of an exception than a rule, as there are special shows for those languages. However, some issues seem too complex to be expressed in standard French, even for those with a good command of the language. (The degree of proficiency in French does not necessarily correlate with formal school qualifications.)

Most major *grogne* shows in Bénin are broadcast during the morning hours, except for shows produced by BIP Radio and Radio Parakou (in the afternoon). *Grogne* shows are sometimes part of larger programmes, such as *Le grand direct de l'information* on Radio Fraternité in Parakou. Thus, some shows compete with each other, such as those in Parakou (stations such as Arzèkè FM, Urban FM, and Radio Parakou offer *grogne* shows coincidentally at 6:30 a.m. on weekdays) and some in Cotonou (on Fridays, the French show *Grogne* overlaps on CAPP FM with those on Radio Cotonou)⁹. The discussion-type call-in shows may also compete with other programmes for audiences, for instance, during typical broadcasting times of political debates with studio guests (during talk shows) on Sunday mornings or Friday evenings. Station managers argue that, despite the competition, this positioning reflects established listening habits.

Interactive radio shows are popular in urban areas and are frequently featured in print media, especially when politicians reveal important information or announce new laws that are then discussed on the air. Some of the main broadcasting houses, which operate both radio stations and TV studios, synchronise these debate shows. For instance, Océan FM in Cotonou and Urban FM in Parakou, both belonging to the media house Matinal, synchronise the Sunday debate show *Cartes sur table*, most often hosted by Sosthène Fadairo and Aziz Adam Soulé.

9 During the *grogne* shows on Radio Parakou (Friday at 10 a.m. and Monday at 4 p.m.), callers have more time available and can intervene twice to address problems in their neighbourhoods (e.g. broken roads, frequent thefts, illegal allotments).

The table below provides an overview of the different types of interactive and *grogne* formats:

Table 1: Types of interactive and *grogne* formats

Type	Programmes, in French (selection)
Collecting style; Call-in statements of listeners with few or no additional comments by a host	<i>La grogne matinale</i> , Golfe FM (until 2023) <i>Je n'aime pas ça</i> , Atlantic FM (until 2023) <i>Allô BIP</i> , BIP Radio, Cotonou <i>Grogne</i> , Radio CAPP FM, Cotonou <i>À vous l'antenne</i> , Peace FM, Cotonou <i>Parole aux citoyens</i> , Radio Cotonou <i>Opinions</i> , Radio Planète, Cotonou <i>Bonjour chez vous</i> , Arzèkè FM, Parakou <i>Grogne</i> , Fraternité FM, Parakou <i>Les auditeurs en ligne</i> , Radio Parakou
Dialogic style; Call-in statements of listeners, most often discussing with the host	<i>Nasuba</i> , Radio Parakou <i>Tribune libre</i> , Radio CAPP FM Cotonou <i>Carton rouge</i> , Golfe FM (until 2023) <i>Échos de l'actualité</i> , Radio Bénin
Discussion-style; Call-in statements of listeners, most often in relation to studio guests debating a central topic, mostly collected	<i>Franc parler</i> , Radio Cotonou <i>Décryptage</i> , Radio CAPP FM Cotonou <i>Cartes sur table</i> , Océan FM <i>Question du jour</i> , Fraternité FM, Parakou <i>L'invité de la semaine</i> , Nanto FM, Natitingou

Almost all *grogne* shows start with an opening jingle, which emphasises the importance of the show as a free expression of opinion. The usual catchphrases broadcast by Radio Cotonou, for example, start with '*Parole aux citoyens* (word to citizens) – your voices matter! Radio Cotonou gives you the floor to collect your concerns, satisfactions and suggestions. Word to citizens – it's on 94.3, Radio Cotonou – Word to citizens: join us from Monday to Friday from 9 a.m. to 9.30 a.m. by dialling 40111718 or 50 52 52 73. Radio Cotonou: the voice of the Cotonois' (2025). Some jingles are comprised of a compilation of previous statements, such as the one aired by Peace FM during their weekday morning *grogne* show, including one by Sébastien, which makes him rather proud. On CAPP FM, the show *Tribune libre* starts as follows: (Musical intro) 'It's the peo-

ple who speak! Open forum – CAPP FM listeners comment on the highlights of the news! It's every Saturday from 8 o'clock to 9 o'clock' (Radio CAPP FM, August 2025).

In summary, these shows are a constant part of the programming schedule of almost all radio stations in the country.

Grogne Shows and Public Debates: Persistent Topics and News

Call-in *grogne* radio programmes are a perfect mirror of the urban everyday life of many people in metropolitan areas and address typical problems faced by most people in Bénin. Callers' complaints refer to a diverse range of issues, including defective roads, arrogant officials, brutal truck drivers, and garbage dumps around the market, as well as the rising prices of daily commodities and harsh government decisions. The programme reflects the various difficulties and struggles of everyday life. Many expressions of the *grogneurs* refer to problems of infrastructure in their immediate neighbourhoods. They often ask the local authorities to do a much better job of maintaining or repairing them, as the following example demonstrates:

[Caller:] 'Bonjour, my name is Solange Koukoui. I call you from Akpakpa'.
[Host:] 'You are on the line, Madame'. [Caller:] 'In the second arrondissement, the streets should have been restored. Where I live, the route from Minando to Africando has not been completely finalised. So, we ask the mayor to monitor the contractor well and make sure everything will be finished to the end! Have a good day, Monsieur Mamadou Boukari!' [Host:] 'Thank you, Madame!' (*La grogne matinal*, Golfe FM, 26 October 2018)

Often, *grogneurs* advance problems they face themselves, for instance, when their children are obliged to stay home due to teachers' strikes. Other issues also concern corruption in public procurement or the non-payment of wages. Here is a random list of topics that have been addressed by *grogneurs*, based on my notes in April 2023 (Cotonou, Radio Cotonou and Radio CAPP FM).

- Drinking water scarcity in Akpakpa neighbourhoods; broken roads to a market in Sèmè-Kpodji;
- Corruption suspicions during campaigns of cadastral work; abandoned road works in Tchònvì;

- Doubts about the hygiene of the 'pure water' drinking water sold in bags;
- The bad treatment of patients in a public hospital;
- Unfinished public works in a market in Cotonou; and such.

Some of the topics that dominate these shows constantly recur: above all, the ever-present lack of electricity, with power cuts and rolling blackouts that regularly turn parts of the town into darkness. *Grogneurs* here mainly blame the *Société Béninoise d'Énergie Electrique* (SBEE), the main (parastatal) energy supplier, along with the energy minister and the president, while expressing the wish to be relieved. The second most perennial issue includes bad or defunct roads, which can cause fatal accidents, unfinished construction, and over-flooded roads and pathways, especially in the rainy season (see below).

Furthermore, the *grogneurs* often complain about broken streetlights, traffic lights, and road signs. Local issues, such as the lack of water supplies, equipment in hospitals and real estate issues (including the lack of land allocations and rezoning [*recasement*] by local administrations), can comprise most of the issues discussed by the *grogneurs*. Lastly, one of the most often mentioned problems is noise pollution. The well-known *grogneur* Ramanou Gbadamassi made the following comment:

Without us, the *grogneurs*, the condition of roads, streetlamps, and running water in the region would have been worse, because we talk about it first before anybody else. Then, authorities went to repair things, and thanks to us, things went better in many localities. (Abomey-Calavi, August 2023)

Notwithstanding the aforementioned proximate concerns, current political affairs and social problems also comprise the discursive field to which the *grogneurs* actively contribute. Gbadamassi cited, for example, the case of the recruitment of agents for the state office for social security, which, as usual, was connected to tests (*concours*). Obviously, people were placed on the list for these tests who were not even available in the country. Other candidates passed the tests, although they did not achieve the required results. Gbadamassi received such as list from a friend in the administration who had taken photos with his smartphone and from other *grogneurs* as well. It was the *grogneurs* who transmitted this information, long before other media took up these issues. Later, many of these recruitments were simply stopped and later completely reorganised.

Repeatedly, *grogneurs* in Cotonou demand the reopening of the government-shut-down radio station Radio Golfe FM. Recently, general and presidential elections, the modified electoral law, the exclusion of oppositional candidates for formal reasons, and the revised constitution (which was hastily voted in November 2025, introducing, among others, a Senate and prolonging mandates for presidents and MPs to seven years (Dahandé 2025; Aplogan 2025) have been repeatedly discussed. *Grogneurs'* critiques also addressed inadequate compensation for displaced residents in tourism development programmes (e.g. *La route de Pêche*, a strip between Cotonou and Ouidah, meanwhile outfitted to accommodate hotels, restaurants, and golf courses) and seaside promenades in Cotonou (*corniches*). *Grogneurs* also remind authorities to resolve social problems, for example missing subsidies for poor patients or help for sacked workers. Furthermore, the *grogneurs* have addressed the fate of political prisoners and the conditions of prisons in general.

In a similar regard, another debate was the affair of Ajavon. Sébastien Ajavon, a wealthy businessman, was a former ally of President Patrice Talon. Later, Ajavon became Talon's opponent. Ajavon established, among other things, the independent radio station Soleil FM (banned in 2019). In 2017, Ajavon was accused of smuggling drugs and went into exile to avoid a sentence of 20 years in prison (Duhem 2018).

Here, public information was scarce, as was the case with the appearance and conflicts reflected in the Banamè church (Tall 2015, see below, p. 53). These events triggered the *grogneurs* to elucidate the intricacies of juridical processes, which maintained a high level of public awareness. Other issues were the juridical pursuit of opposition politicians, such as Reckya Madougou and Joel Aïvo. Many callers saw these trials as essentially political, designed to exclude potential opponents.

Furthermore, some *grogneurs* always target general failures of the government, such as the lack of employment for young people and the rising consumer prices despite government interventions. Evoking the general political situation in the country, these *grogneurs* use utterances such as 'things are wrong in Bénin' (*ça ne vas pas au Bénin*) or 'the country is ill' (*le pays va mal*), particularly when insisting on the social aspect (*le hautement social*) of reforms, promised by President Talon for his second term in office, whereas others are more focused.

In addition, larger events, such as election campaigns, festivals, conferences, and major government operations, provide fertile ground for debate.

For instance, recurrent evictions (*déguerpissements*) of informal settlers or petty traders from public urban places caused considerable unrest due to their brutal implementation. Most callers accepted the initiative undertaken by the government as part of the new mode of governance (i.e. rupture) and the will to induce change in the country on all possible levels. They were, however, much more critical about the methods used. They criticised the harsh procedures and wished that more alternative options for vendors were created beforehand. Callers often mentioned that many people who had to earn their daily bread through informal activities were now suffering.

Other *grogneurs* have pointed out cases of arbitrary actions that involved destroying some people's stalls and shops while protecting those of others in a similar situation. As a result, many callers have expressed a desire to give those affected more time to prepare for their departure, to provide them with better warning, and to help rebuild their businesses or stalls at an alternative location. Similar critiques were issued in 2023 and 2024 by callers regarding the often-brutal means by which police officers enforce new laws and regulations on motorbike drivers, including the obligation to wear helmets.

One of the most persistent and recurring points of contention is the use of public spaces managed by local authorities. These areas, commonly referred to as administrative reserves, are intended for use by local authorities to develop communal projects or create recreational spaces. Their purpose was to be determined by the municipal councils and outlined in local development plans. In some cases, parts of these areas were misused for unintended purposes (e.g. serving as rubbish dumps), or they were even partially sold to private entrepreneurs who did not always operate in the public interest¹⁰.

Thus, the authorities (e.g. those in Abomey-Calavi) have been criticised by frequent callers for not administering public real estates in full transparency, while instead providing opportunities for private entrepreneurs in close personal relationships with them. This issue, which is also emerging in the northern metropolis of Parakou, is of particular interest to people in densely populated urban areas due to the rising real estate and rental prices for both housing and business activities (see example p. 131).

Often, *grogne* shows are part of a general upheaval of popular protest, especially in times of harsh governmental decisions, which are difficult to accept, or

10 Corruption related to real estate transactions, private and public domains alike, is widespread in Bénin and recently led to the establishment of a specialised court, the Cour Spéciale des Affaires foncières (CSAF); Linkpon (2023).

when blatant inequalities are revealed. In this regard, the tense social situation in the country at the end of January 2018, when various trade unions went on strike, found its natural echo in callers' interventions. Most *grogneurs* criticised the government for not being willing to negotiate on an equal basis, as well as trade unions for their stubbornness, while making patients or schoolchildren unwillingly suffer. Other significant issues of debate have included trials involving entrepreneurs who distributed counterfeit medications, as well as the failure of many pupils to pass the exam, which was allegedly caused by the teachers' strike.

A recurring theme in the months of September and October is severe flooding caused by heavy rainfall, coupled with the administration's inability to adapt the infrastructure.

In late February 2017, the government banned the sale of imported medicines, this time again with drastic measures, such as the seizure of stalls at local markets. Again, the *grogneurs* expressed their discontent with the methods which were applied, along with an affirmation regarding the necessity and justifications of the policy as such.

Some issues raised by the *grogneurs* have been part of larger public debates in Bénin. In September 2018, many *grogneurs*, together with other media users, protested very vividly against the significant increase in tariffs for internet usage, especially those with high data volumes, which was especially relevant for social media users. Soon after, a protest movement began to fight against these decisions, led by the association of bloggers, along with many Facebook and WhatsApp activists. Here, *grogneurs* joined and amplified a significant movement of protest, which involved press declarations of civic associations, such as the consumers' union, extensive press coverage, and a multitude of shared posts on social media and messenger services (Agué 2018; BBC 2018a).

In early and mid-2019, a central issue of critical comments raised by many *grogneurs* was the harsh reactions of governmental authorities during protests of oppositional protesters, following the parliamentary elections. At that time, oppositional candidates were banned, officially due to formal reasons (see above, p. 23). While opinions were divided about the usefulness of the new electoral law itself, it was, above all, the excess of violent actions that triggered much anger among the *grogneurs*. Most of them wished that all sides involved would simply calm down to prevent further bloodshed. Some *grogneurs* were personal witnesses of these events, whereas others argued in favour of a simple repetition of the elections.

Furthermore, the *grogneurs* often disapproved of the hasty nature of electoral reforms. The events of that year clearly demonstrated that public debates were very much shaped by contributions of callers to radio stations, predominantly by the *grogneurs*. Later, the procedures for declaring candidates were simplified slightly. Finally, in the 2023 legislative elections, several members of the opposition party *Les Démocrates* were elected, especially in electoral circumscriptions in southern Bénin (Radio France International 2023; Laplace 2023).

However, some topics that concern the press and social media have seemed to appear less frequently during interactive call-in programmes, which applies to the subject of security and terrorism. Since the beginning of 2019, the northern border areas of the Republic of Bénin have been repeatedly marked by terrorist attacks. Its consequences (i.e. fear among the villagers in that region) are well noticed by the public but were hardly mentioned by the *grogneurs*. Callers commented on this issue, for instance, during the programme *Les auditeurs en ligne*, aired by Radio Parakou on 16 September 2022. However, the topic of terrorism was almost never addressed by callers during such interactive shows, which I suspect was due to both the great distance from the incidents in the far north of the country and a reluctance to address issues of national security. In contrast, the failed coup attempt in December 2025 was an important topic.

A significant concern for many media users in Bénin was the numerous fraud cases in which individual phone numbers were misused to send fraudulent SMS messages. These texts mislead mobile phone users into fake accounts and deals. Apparently, the necessary identification procedure, in which buyers of new cell phone numbers and accounts present their identity cards, was circumvented or misused. For example, SIM cards are sold twice to disguise the true identities of those perpetrating these scams. This issue became a topic of several call-in broadcasts reporting on individual cases and proposed solutions (e.g. Radio Bénin, *Échos de l'actualité*, 11.10.2021; *Grogne* on CAPP FM, 8.10.2021). *Grogneurs'* calls contributed to enhancing information about these issues, as they were not fully addressed in other programmes. The most intriguing reports came from those who could narrate concrete cases that they, their friends, or relatives had experienced.

Nonetheless, *grogneurs* don't shy away from tough words. When six Members of Parliament (MPs) from the opposition party *Les Démocrates* (LD) defected at the end of October 2025, some callers blamed them for 'having sold their party'. It was alleged that these MPs prioritised their gross salaries over fulfilling their mandate. Specifically, it was claimed that immediately after the elections, the MPs abandoned their constituencies to take their parliamentary

seats in Porto-Novo and failed to return to address the needs of their electorate (*Tribune Libre*, CAPP FM 1.11.25).

Major scandals and national media events

In addition to the issues mentioned above related to current and changing topics of daily life, some *grogneurs* like to refer to long-standing issues, often scandals or murky affairs, which are still under investigation or have not been finally resolved. These topics include scandals such as the unfinished first construction site of a new parliament (see III, footnote 1), as well as the still-deficient compensation for families displaced due to power plant construction sites (e.g. in Maria-Gléta) or beach-side tourism projects (Amnesty International 2025).

Often, such statements are wrapped in moral appeals to authorities to resolve the mentioned problem. On 15 October 2021, Brice Sognibé noted that the agreed-upon bonus payments for soldiers had not been paid: 'This is disgraceful towards our brave men in uniform, the minister of finances should take immediate action' (Atlantic FM, *Je n'aime pas ça*).

Grogneurs were, much more than journalists, also active in condemning the circumstances under which the ICC scandal, which surfaced under President Yayi Boni, had been allowed to happen. The ICC group, beyond any governmental control, developed a nationwide Ponzi scheme. Its breakdown caused countless people to lose large sums (BBC 2019). The main instigators were sentenced, yet responsible authorities were not fully held accountable. The respective tribunal sessions were, however, covered live by various radio stations.

Conversely, a terrible bus accident became a national topic of radio debates. In January 2023, the dramatic fate of an overland bus belonging to the company BAOBAB in the town of Dassa on Sunday, 29 January 2023, caused many casualties due to a fire (Mensah 2023; Togonou 2023). The incident was widely discussed throughout the country and among the *grogneurs*. The bus hit a truck, and 22 passengers, who did not escape from the vehicle in time, lost their lives in the resulting fire. Shortly thereafter, the government took action by establishing special commissions to care for the survivors and observing a national mourning period.

The event became the subject of various caller broadcasts on numerous stations in early February 2023. The listeners expressed their sadness and anger at the poor condition of many important roads in the country. They criticised

the obvious failure of the fire brigade, which was also inadequately equipped on site, similar to the hospitals, as well as a lack of safety regulations, as bystanders took photos of the accident bus, including pictures of burned bodies.

During a *Tribune libre* show (4 February 2023), many *grogneurs* pointed out that poor roads were one of the major causes of accidents. They referred to their home region and the poor conditions of the *piste cyclable*, a separate branch line for moped riders next to the main motorway to Porto-Novo. This condition repeatedly required bikers to switch to the main road. 'We, the *grogneurs*, have been criticising these deficiencies for a long time. Now everyone is condemning it, but we have been addressing it for a long time' was the attitude of many callers, such as Paul Chodaton, Barnabé Agbekponou, Sébastien Gnonhossou, and Anselme Kpindjo (CAPP FM; *Tribune libre*, 4.2.2023).

Similar comments were made repeatedly by the *grogneurs* at the beginning of August 2021. The incident involved a bridge in the Fifadji district that was so dilapidated that it broke and required repair. The bridge was to be closed for a few days. In interactive radio broadcasts, several *grogneurs* took up this point and emphasised that they were the ones who had complained about the situation.

Likewise, *grogneurs* demanded sanctions against those held responsible for the death of two visitors of a football match at the National Stadium in June 2023 (RFI 2023), and the many victims of a further bus accident in August 2025 (TV5 Monde 2025).

Digression: *Radio Trottoir*, Mediatisation and *Grogne* Shows in Bénin

The fact that these issues, from dilapidated roads to corrupt politicians, are part of open, publicly (mass-) mediated statements available to almost all listeners is undoubtedly a remarkable shift when compared to the *radio trottoir* (Ellis 1989; cf. also Nkanga 1992, Yoka 1984): previously restricted, informal information circuits (regardless of their important social relevance). Today, scandals are being exposed while debates about the state and future of the nation have been more open than ever before. The effect of participatory media, together with social media and mobile messenger services and networks (e.g. WhatsApp), is considerably persistent, despite various attempts to control directly or indirectly the media in Bénin (Grätz 2015b). It is part of a larger, overall process of change, where the media generally play a significant role in the daily life of most people on earth more than ever before.

This process is called ‘mediatisation’ (Krotz 2001, 2007), one element of others in the larger process of globalisation. The term refers to a larger presence of political issues in public or private media. It also conceptualised the growing interconnectivity of media on a global scale, the flow of information between content and networks, and finally, the transformation of everyday culture and social relations using media of all kinds.

In the case of Bénin, mediatisation means that flows of information between different regions within the country, between people inside and outside the country, at various sites and places, as well as between different types of media, are growing and becoming more rapid and intensive. Nonetheless, locality matters. In most cases, the people in Bénin discuss domestic issues and politics more than events outside the country.

Indeed, in our case of *grogne* shows, foreign affairs find a very limited place. Most listeners certainly know who the incumbent presidents of France, Senegal and the United States are, but only intellectuals comment more boldly about them in public media. One explanation is that *grogne* shows, as a particular media genre, were not meant to discuss foreign affairs from the outset and are not considered by most habitual media consumers as an appropriate forum to do so as a matter of convention or habit.

Another argument is specifically related to the general idea of being heard, which has motivated *grogneurs* from the beginning to the present day to be heard by local governmental authorities and politicians who can ideally help to improve situations, end problematic affairs, and change attitudes in general. Such an idea, as ideal or realistic it may be (see Chapter V, p. 135), is not that easily translatable to foreign affairs where politicians operating outside the country are involved.

Here, however, things may change in the future, particularly concerning issues that involve the Béninese abroad more than ever before. The increasing speed of information flows inevitably leads to the spread of rumours.

Thus, the example of the Banamè (or Gbanamé) church, *La Très Sainte Église de Jésus-Christ, Mission de Banamè*, is particularly revealing case to discuss rumours and the impact of social media. Since the beginning of 2015, the rise of this independent church has generated considerable discussion and numerous stories, especially in southern Bénin. Founded in 2009 by a dissident priest of the Roman Catholic Church, who subsequently promoted a young woman, Parfaite, who claimed to have a revelation, while claiming to be a representative of God, the church embodies a charismatic movement of healing (Muratsu 2022a; 2022b) that was attracting numerous followers and new

adherents in the country (Tall 2015). However, her humiliating declarations about the error of other churches and the open proselytising nature of the church have provoked much polemic and opposition from people who have not accepted her attitude and public presence. Rumours have circulated that the newly elected president, Patrice Talon, is a member of the church, supports it, and owes part of his success to this support, as the church had prophesied his election some months earlier. Open manifestations against members of other denominations led to various clashes, barely covered by newspapers or radio stations.

At the beginning of January 2017, clashes in Abomey resulted in several injured people, so police officers intervened to arrest many adepts of this church. The official media did not initially cover these events, so the *grogneurs* were among those publicly drawing attention to these issues and warning of further upheaval and inter-religious unrest.

These examples demonstrate that rumours or unofficial information are no longer confined to informal popular communication or limited oral public spheres. These domains enter not only social media, but also interactive radio shows, transgressing the boundaries of 'radio trottoir'. However, *grogneurs* did not amplify popular speculation, but were rather trying to objectify these events during their interventions on air, framing them as lack of governmental control.

The Predominance of Frequent Callers

All these shows are primarily open to participation, as they allow all listeners to call in. What justifies a clear distinction between these and the *grogneurs* who dominate the shows? It is first and foremost their attitudes, their information strategies, and the sheer frequency of their calls. To exemplify their presence on the air, I analysed a sample of recordings from morning shows on Golfe FM, Radio Cotonou, BIP Radio, as well as the Saturday show on CAPP FM. Furthermore, programmes on Fraternité FM were occasionally recorded as well (due to unstable internet connections) during the periods of June to October 2018 and January to July 2022.

I recorded a total of 83 such shows, either using internet connections (i.e. livestreams or podcasts) or, during fieldwork periods, direct transmission on the air (with the help of direct or indirect recording devices). In some cases, I asked the station's staff to transfer recorded audio files of some of these shows.

Furthermore, I counted all the recorded calls throughout these shows (630) and compiled a simple list with the names and locations of all callers, along with the overall number of their interventions, as far as I could understand them, throughout these shows.

The list revealed that 22 of the most active *grogneurs* (i.e. intervening at least twice a week on any radio station) alone constituted up to 80% of all incoming calls during the mentioned *grogne* shows. Among the most active *grogneurs*, nine were responsible for 25% of all calls recorded. This sample confirmed that these *grogneurs* essentially overtook these shows.

However, these numbers do not mean that the most active callers mentioned above always make important statements or reveal sensitive information. Some of them simply discuss current issues in public life or politics in a general way, apparently eager to call in for whatever reasons (including a potential kind of addiction, habit, or zeal) to confirm their presence on the airwaves. Others wish to focus the attention of listeners and authorities on a particular problem by using the strategy of repetition over a period of several weeks, in hopes that this approach will result in a solution in their favour.

However, the reputation of a *grogneur* depends on more than the simple frequency of their presence on the air. More often, the presentation of a sensitive case, with compelling information including concrete facts and figures, which may not have been mediated elsewhere (perhaps on WhatsApp), helps to build a good reputation (e.g. in the case of Hermann Méton or Sébastien) due to this overexposure. A solid reputation as a *grogneur*, as confirmed by 'ordinary' listeners and other *grogneurs* in interviews, can be further sustained by engaging in other media activities, such as disseminating valuable information on internet platforms or appearing at other debate forums, as studio guests, or in listeners' associations.

Grogne Shows, Media Policies, and Adaptations

'*Les auditeurs en ligne* – This is the journal of the listeners, a forum in which the listeners call to grudge (*grogneurs*), to denounce everything that does not work in their environment. This interactive programme is heard by all, especially by authorities and political leaders. It is also broadcast in the national languages Bariba, Fon and Dendi' (Programme presentation Radio Parakou, November 2022, *Les auditeurs en ligne*).

A central concern for many listeners, especially for media authorities such as the HAAC, remains the issue of the veracity of such individually uttered statements. Hence, debates revolve around the modalities for addressing potential abuses, such as defamation and verbal gaffes (*dérappages*), while guaranteeing the right to counterstatements. However, protective media laws should not hinder the freedom of expression. Such debates often arise in cases of media intervention by authorities.

For instance, in 2005, the famous show *La grogne matinal* on Golfe FM was disapproved for the first time. After the assassination of the President of the Court of Appeal (*Cour d'Appel*), Séverin Coovi, at the end of November 2005, many callers made regionalist and defamatory statements. The HAAC then intervened, for instance, on 2 December 2005 and called the responsible parties to a hearing. The resumption of the programme was conceded under the condition of avoiding any such expressions while excluding listeners identified with them from the outset (Adoun/Awoudo 2007: 47). According to discussions between the HAAC and the representatives of the radio station, a new variant was agreed upon, in which personal names and addresses could no longer be mentioned by callers in their critical commentaries, while problems could be more commonly addressed.

Nevertheless, discussions on the potential risk of problematic statements prevailed. During both the presidential and parliamentary elections in 2007, further infractions, including the defamation of politicians and statements based on rumours, were recorded. After several rounds of negotiation between the HAAC and the journalist associations, some compromises were found. To avoid excessive manipulation, for example, by politicians, it was decided to pause these programmes during election campaigns (starting with the presidential elections in Spring 2006). Furthermore, it was agreed that the hosts of these broadcast formats should remind all callers of the basic rules to avoid slander.

Consequently, at the beginning, the rules of a *grogne* show are always recounted (i.e. courtesy and no blaming without proof). Most hosts then launch the show with an explanation of its character and guidelines (e.g. limited time) while asking callers to avoid assigning personal blame (*pas d'attaques personnelles*). Additionally, callers must provide their full names, current locations, and detailed information about their complaints. This opening has become the standard of all such shows in Bénin.

However, the HAAC has occasionally reprimanded radio stations for poorly handling these shows. In many cases, the stations were first of all admonished.

An example occurred recently in August 2025, when the regional office of the HAAC issued a warning to the broadcaster Arzèkè FM. During a *grogne* show, a caller criticised 'those Christians who would leave their deceased parents for too long a time at the morgue, yet the law would allow them a delay of one week only'.

The representatives of the HAAC based their notice on two objections. First, the host had missed the opportunity to immediately correct the facts, as the law allowed each family to retain the deceased for at least one month. Furthermore, wrongly addressing 'all the Christians' constituted an undesirable generalising opinion in a situation of religious neutrality (Donatien Djèglé, HAAC, August 2025, Parakou).

In all cases of suspension of such shows by the HAAC, the programmes were later resumed, primarily due to the protests of listeners and media professionals. However, therefore, many radio stations increasingly used the possibility of 'pre-filtering' callers by first answering them off the air with a studio technician or the host, to gauge the caller's intentions and potential issues. Hence, unwelcome interventions could be blocked or mitigated.

For example, Urbain Akakpo, the host of the morning call-in show *Opinions* on the private station Radio Planète FM, answers all calls himself off the air, demanding the respective callers explain their statements. During this conversation, he airs musical tunes. Once he gives his approval, he asks the caller to go on the air and introduces the caller to the listeners (15 October 2021). Typically, hosts of such shows demand proof as soon as they feel that delicate issues may compromise them. Typical examples include, 'Do you have any proof of what you are saying? ... I said that you must have evidence to present such denunciations!' A host from CAPP FM explained the following:

You must be careful. Sometimes, people are just angry and go beyond the standards of politeness. Then, you must interrupt them, try to calm them down, appease them, or, when they won't change their attitude, to cut from the line. (Wilfried Ahouassou, July 2022)

Such proof should ideally be provided prior to the show, either by visiting the station or sending documents electronically. Conversely, some *grogneurs* underline the fact that it is not always easy to present clear proof. Barnabé Agbekponou, a young employee, despite his young age (36 in 2025), who is well respected among his fellow *grogneurs*, argued,

Proofs are a problem. Not all proofs are visual or on paper, where you can present them. What if you have seen things yourself with your own eyes, and you had not time to take an image – you are the witness. Is this not a proof? (Cotonou, October 2022)

Most *grogneurs* would, nevertheless, accept such requirements, as these may distinguish them from plain manipulators. The experienced *grogneur* in Parakou Adam Bachirou explains:

People know me. When I'm far away, they call me and tell me what's going on. Many also come to my workshop to talk about their problems. It's important to verify all this information. For example, I recently received a message about a problem at the bus station. First, I called the other side to get one side of the information, and then I went there to get the other version. And then I prepared my statement. Today, I received a complaint about the status of a public road construction project. Here is a PDF file on the project that I received from a friend at the municipality with all the details. This will help me better prepare for my *grogne* call after evaluating the situation. (Parakou, October 2021)

Such a proof is the most crucial element in cases involving highly sensitive, emotionally charged issues such as embezzlement or abuse, rather than for any given complaint (e.g. about broken lamps or poor service).

Hosts feel the need to avoid accusations from the media authorities. Various strategies used by the moderators stand out. Many hosts simply end a sensitive conversation immediately, usually with the comment 'provide proofs', 'I need details', or 'that's not polite, we want to avoid such statements here' (Philibert Abibou and Urbain Akakpo). Other hosts of these programmes are rather courteous in their rebuttal, but with the same aim of interrupting the caller and bringing the phone call to an end. Typical reactions include, 'We don't want to say that on air' (*on ne dit pas ça ici*) and 'Let's remain polite and avoid offensive statements' (Honoré Nahum, Wilfried Ahouassou)!

Other strategies journalists employ to prevent calamitous situations include pre-recording phone calls the evening before, which allows them to delete potentially inappropriate statements. Journalists usually justify this practice as a means to avoid abuses directly on the air while augmenting the technical quality. This approach allows for better control over the debate or the ability to frame them concerning particular time periods. This method became typical for Golfe FM and also Radio Atlantic FM in Cotonou. Most ac-

tive *grogneurs*, however, contest the procedure of pre-recording because quite often, their statements are not aired. Solange Koukouï noted his unhappiness with the procedure:

Very often, they will leap your statement when editing the final broadcast without any real cause. There are urgent matters to talk about, such as problems of schooling, but perhaps they fear consequences. (Cotonou, 1.1.2024)

Sébastien Gnonhossou mentioned that interest in listening to stations that apply a strict pre-recording format, such as Atlantic FM (now Kiff FM), Golfe FM, has considerably dropped (personal communication, Cotonou, 15 October 2021). Furthermore, many *grogneurs* have argued that pre-recordings lack the appeal of direct interventions and spontaneous contributions. Furthermore, debates about the possible misuse of such programmes have continued. Some *grogneurs* have raised suspicions about radio staff using this prerogative for other ends, for instance, for calling the person in charge of a firm or an authority to present the issue and pressure those concerned to offer money to prevent the broadcasting (Barnabé Agbekponou, Cotonou, October 2021). Some of these doubts (which cannot be verified) were, in fact, repeatedly raised by members of Golfe FM's listeners' club AFAS-3G, which seem, at least once, had consequences, namely the shifting of the main hosts of the show (in about 2017).

Finally, hosts may always proceed by suspending a call, simply ending the phone call (or asking the technician to do so). They do so either in cases of apparent abuse or sensitive issues, or simply when they feel that a caller has exceeded their allotted time. However, when intervening in such a way, the host uses words such as 'I am withdrawing you from the antenna' (*Je vous retire l'antenne*) or 'You have surpassed your time slot on air' (*vous avez dépassé votre temps d'antenne*; see p.108).

In other instances, the presenters mentioned personal contacts outside the shows. In her programme *Allô BIP*, Rachida Oussou sometimes asks listeners not to discuss the matter over the airwaves and to call her back after the show. This approach enables discussing a sensitive issue without direct accusations and potentially unconsciously defaming others. Furthermore, Rachida Oussou repeatedly reminds callers that they should not mention any individual names, only those of organisations in general (interview in Cotonou, December 2023). The hosts of the *grogne* show *Les auditeurs en ligne* aired by Radio Parakou even go further by disallowing callers to mention private companies. 'We don't want

to talk about these companies because it's about the development of the region in general' is a common reaction by the host. The aim here is to avoid any legal consequences at any price.

Philibert Abibou from CAPP FM also sometimes offers his personal contact information to arrange an appointment with a caller outside of a broadcast to obtain more information or to schedule an on-site appointment to verify the veracity of an issue himself.

The hosts of these shows are experienced journalists of the newsroom section (see below, Chapter III). In most cases, the hosts of these shows meticulously note every caller and the topics addressed, primarily to reiterate the most important topics that could be potentially exploited for their own productions (see below) and to maintain oversight of participation. Many stations establish such lists of callers with comments on their acceptability. This list later helps to convey information on abuses (Léon Okacé, Parakou; August 2025).

At the station Radio Non Sina in Bèmbèrèkè, northeastern Bénin, however, these minutes are somewhat more detailed. There, the topics and arguments of the listeners are carefully recorded so that they can subsequently be addressed to the matching authorities or responsible persons. In cases of more serious controversy or larger conflicts, these calls provide the occasion to produce reports on the context of the case. For example, complaints from the listeners about irregularities in the work of veterinarians led to corresponding critical reports and coverage (Bèmbèrèkè, October 2021).

In some cases, the minutes help produce a summary of the major topics addressed, which are read aloud at the end of the shows (Golfe FM, *Grogne matinal*; CAPP FM, *Tribune libre*). Many hosts display a clear distance and obvious indifference, even when it comes to moving statements, such as accounts of suffering children in defunct schools. Some hosts are extremely passive and simply greet callers and receive their calls, perhaps intervening only in extreme cases (e.g. *La grogne matinal* on Golfe FM). Other hosts, as mentioned above, are more dialogue-oriented and often ask counterquestions, demand proof, or even attempt to identify callers by their voices in an effort to establish a sense of intimacy with them on the air (Soleil FM and CAPP FM).

Philibert Abibou often asks callers to be precise and transparent about their interventions. He also adds remarks such as, 'You are the tenth caller', while inserting greetings to some *grogneurs* who have not yet called in. Thus, he continually reiterates the issues raised during the show in a short yet comprehensive way.

As mentioned earlier, stations sometimes prefer to pre-record callers' interventions (e.g. Golfe FM)¹¹. Pre-recording, however, requires some additional resources in terms of personal capacities that many local stations may not always possess. Thus, the thematically open and live format is the easiest to produce, yet it is also the riskiest and challenging one to handle for any host. In this case, defamatory allegations and unjustified accusations may always occur and require special attention, and if necessary, an immediate, strong yet well-thought-out reaction by the host. On occasion, hosts simply interrupt callers while reminding them of the show's principles: to be polite and avoid personal defamation. In other cases, hosts simply state, 'We don't address matters in this way, sir' or 'No, this can't be true'.

Sometimes, I also noticed conflicts that arose during a *grogne* show when listeners disagreed with such presenters' reactions, and contentious discussions came about between hosts and callers, for example, between Philibert Abibou and Barnabé Agbekponou, as well as between Prospère Vondjehoungo and François Kantchenou. Most often, it was a matter of finding the right words to express the caller's problems more politely.

An analogous conflict occurred between Benjamin Nahum and *grogneur* Eugène Ewagnignon. In February 2024, Nahum interrupted Ewagnignon during a morning *grogne* show when the latter raised complaints against the water supplier SONEB (*Société Nationale des Eaux du Bénin*) for not paying bonuses to its personnel. Nahum argued that Ewagnignon had used the wrong wording, thereby personally inculcating the director of that firm rather impolitely.

Conversely, the practice of focusing on a specific topic for discussion has the advantage of better managing the interventions of different *grogneurs*. The aforementioned Saturday morning show, *Tribune libre*, produced by CAPP FM, is intended to focus the attention of listeners and callers on recent political issues. The host usually settles into the main broadcasting studio, whereas the technician in the main control room receives callers to put them live on the air. Then, the host starts a discussion with callers. Sometimes, the webmaster is also present to stream the show live on Facebook, which is also meant to avoid statements on delicate issues that are challenging to handle (e.g. internal discussions among the *grogneurs*) or local, general issues (e.g. defunct roads), with the hope that several callers will relate to similar issues and provide a plethora

11 This often takes the form of the simulation of a live show (i.e. le faux-direct), in which the presenter receives callers and responds to their interventions, even though the show is not broadcast live.

of diverse opinions. During the show, the journalist (mainly Philibert Abibou from 2020) often reminds the callers to keep a tight focus on the subject matter. Typical interventions of hosts include, 'Did you tune into the show from the beginning, and do you know about the topic?' or 'Please, stay on topic. What is your opinion on today's issues?' (Studio observations 2022–2025) Conversely, when it came to controversial statements of callers, journalists often answered, 'It's your opinion,' just to distance themselves from the opinions raised. This leaves space for interpretation, yet would not compromise the hosts.

Interactive and participatory forms of media production, such as the *grogne* shows in Bénin, are co-produced by hosts, technicians, frequent callers, and other listeners. These shows have become a cornerstone of the mass-media-related public sphere in this country to create, as Srinivasan and Abreu Lopes (2020) coined, a 'mediated sociability' based on good relationships that increasingly develop between journalists and frequent callers. Likewise, these shows are a form of political communication (see below). Selormey, in her (previously mentioned) study on similar programmes in Accra (2012), proposed the useful expression 'mediated voice' to conceptualise the interventions by frequent callers that express people's worries and perspectives, as conveyed through dominant media to authoritative agencies (e.g. government officials; see also Nunoo 2015).

To conclude this chapter, we analysed the general mode of production of *grogne* shows within the respective radio stations, as well as the main issues which have dominated these programmes throughout the recent past. These shows have caught the attention of media authorities, politicians, and the broader public alike, which has led to both appraisal and contestation. Meanwhile, the genre has been established, also as a result of internal adjustments to external pressures by the radio stations (e.g. increased scrutiny in selecting callers and topics) and subsequent accommodations by both hosts and callers to these shows.

The main actors discussed here, the *grogneurs* in Bénin, are media activists and a distinct category of such. Officially, they are recognised in the edition of the Béninese media law of 2015¹². This step is important in recognising their role in Bénin's media landscape, but it does not guarantee the absence of political pressure on them.

12 The Béninese media law from 2017 mentions the *grogneurs* in Article 22, as 'assimilated and auxiliary to the function of journalist', AN (2015).

In the following, I will analyse the various modes and strategies of individual *grogneurs*. What are their skills, strategies, and motives? How do they unfold their activities? The next chapter introduces these actors in more detail by pointing to common features and the great variety of personal styles, modes of action, and attitudes of both the *grogneurs* and the hosts of these shows.

Figure 5: Adam Bachirou, vulcaniser, Parakou, August 2025.



Source: Author

Chapter III: *Grogne* Shows: Main Actors and Practices

Who Are the *Grogneurs*? Profiles and Motives

August 2022. Throughout the day, clients, traders, artisans, friends, and acquaintances visit Sébastien's workshop. Some of them just pass by because the dwelling is well placed and enables a short stopover. Some visitors are just people greeting him, while others supply news and information or keep him updated on recent events. Clients may also become informants. 'Here, I am well placed to get all kinds of information'.

Grogneurs are passionate callers who address everyday problems and social issues. They are predominantly men (frequent female callers are described in more detail on p. 83), who stem from almost all strata of society and occupations. The professions of the frequent callers I interviewed were primarily in the fields of small businesses, public service, retail shops (e.g. Sanda N'Gobi, Figure 8), commercial offices, hotels, and the craft sectors, such as running workshops (e.g. tailors and welders) or providing services (e.g. plumbers and photographers).

Most *grogneurs*, both men and women, were self-employed, followed by civil servants (e.g. accountants, secretaries and teachers), and pensioners. Among them were motorbike mechanics, agricultural entrepreneurs, bricklayers, sign painters, as well as IT specialists, farmers, and students (at the time of the survey). Several *grogneurs* were small entrepreneurs who, for example, traded in household appliances and furniture or ran a farm. They were all largely literate and interested in politics and the media. However, their most important common feature was that they devoted time to calling in and participating in *grogne* shows at home or during working hours.

Comparing the different attitudes and careers of the *grogneurs* I interviewed, both similarities and differences became apparent. Most *grogneurs*

clearly saw themselves as intermediaries and wanted to make little-known, lesser-mediatised yet pertinent information accessible to a larger audience. Some were regularly consulted in spontaneous, informal opinion polls on the street when their places of work were well known. Many felt a special gratification when they were heard (and recognised) by others due to attracting attention and expressing themselves on the air as a kind of self-technique.

This gain in reputation, prestige, and recognition of other *grogneurs*, as well as other radio listeners, is often a strong incentive to intervene live on the air. This outcome especially applies to those *grogneurs* who do not have a formal school qualification, such as Julienne Tokponwe, a market woman in Natitingou (interviews July 2024 and August 2025), and Razack Bokossa, a security guard and bricklayer's assistant in Cotonou (interview December 2023).

Some *grogneurs* are regularly invited to studio discussions on the radio. For instance, on 24 October 2021, Valentin Ayonou, a state employee working in the Department of Environmental Affairs, was invited to appear as a studio guest during the weekly discussion show *Le grand débat* on Radio CAPP FM in Cotonou. This time, the topic proposed by the show's host was the security threat on public streets, threatened by drivers of cars and trucks in Bénin who do not respect the rules. Other studio guests were the press officer of the National Traffic Safety Centre and a professional driver. Here, Valentin Ayonou introduced himself simply as a '*leader d'opinion*'. He challenged many of the visions of the press officer. Apparently, Valentin was invited because, within the framework of his calls, he often hinted at the risks caused by old cars and badly parked heavy trucks.

According to my research, most *grogneurs* share an attitude of 'enlightenment' and public opinion formation, combined with a strong ego and the desire for recognition. Although many of these frequent callers have developed preferences for specific channels (e.g. members of some listeners' clubs, p.139) they rarely use a single station to broadcast their conversations. Instead, they utilise various offerings, often in different time slots, to express themselves in multiple ways. Some of them also call in to other interactive radio programmes (e.g. quiz shows, and those revolving around questions of partnership; (Grätz 2014a). In other cases, individuals turn to *grogneurs*, who have already presented facts before the authorities in vain.

Many *grogneurs* are primarily interested in the communication of relevant information, often derived from their professional backgrounds. In urban centers, craftspeople and traders are among the most frequent daytime callers. Since they operate in local markets and pivotal workplaces with constant visi-

tor traffic, nodal points of social exchange, they are uniquely positioned at the heart of urban communication flows.

'One-Two', for instance, is a well-known *grogneur* in the town of Natitingou who works as a tyre mechanic. He is known to all people in his neighbourhood and, of course, numerous motorcyclists. He speaks in Dendi and often listens to the local radio station, Radio Nanto. He is on the air at least once a week. Visiting him in this neighbourhood, he pointed at a non-operational sewage system, where wastewater could not flow. He clarified:

I always call in when I find a defunct road, rubbish in the sewage pipes, and I when I feel that authorities do nothing against it. Our town, Natitingou, cannot evolve without such interventions. (Natitingou, July 2024)

A similar role has Adam Bachirou who has already been mentioned above. He is, for instance, one of the most respected and long-standing *grogneurs* in Parakou and the surrounding area. Working as a tyre fitter and vulcaniser, he is originally from Savè and has lived in Parakou for 20 years. He is in his 40s, married and has five children. He mostly calls in to Radio Arzèkè Parakou because it is close to the listeners, and he listens to a diversity of other programmes throughout the day. Most of the topics he addresses during his interventions concern problems of municipal infrastructure or real estate issues. He runs his workshop near the Zongo market, in the heart of Parakou, and emphasises that he always tries to verify all information. He also loves to stroll around the city, especially on Sundays, to find out the news.

In Parakou, Adam was invited to meet the president Yayi during one of his visits to town. He was first afraid of legal consequences, but in this case, the president (who often changed his mind) welcomed his actions and encouraged him to continue (Parakou, March 2013, February 2017). Very often, Adam is invited to studio discussions at various radio stations or is interviewed about current issues.

Adam is a founding and active member of a circle of *grogneurs* in Parakou (see p. 139). Most journalists highly respect him because he barely makes false accusations. Nonetheless, he is feared by some authorities because of his sharp-tongued interventions. Of course, like most *grogneurs*, he now also uses the possibility of smartphones, especially WhatsApp, along with text messages for sharing and checking information (various interviews in Parakou, 2021–2025).

A pertinent issue Adam evoked during his calls was the whereabouts of construction work machines that the city administration in Parakou had purchased for road maintenance services. However, these costly devices were hardly used in the city at that time, despite the significant damage to secondary roads and paths caused by the rainy season. Several *grogneurs* lamented this issue, but Adam Bachirou supplemented that these machines were indeed in use, but only in the neighbouring community of N'Dali. He received pictures via WhatsApp from a friend out there. Calls to the city administration finally revealed that it was an active measure to lend the machines for money to refinance their acquisition costs. Thus, Adam Bachirou and others pointed out in subsequent broadcasts that this measure had to remain proportionate. Indeed, deployment should also take place in Parakou, as the damage would likely escalate over time if they waited too long (Parakou, August 2024).

Meanwhile, some of those who were among the very first, outspoken *grogneurs* ceased their call-in activities. Some of these people simply had to pay tribute to their advancing age and health conditions. Others felt that the current media situation would pose too many constraints upon them. Still others were more occupied with other activities, such as Nestor Avononmadégbé, a frequent caller from the outset, who now presides over an NGO.

Calling in Between Radio Messaging and Self-Positioning

Grogneurs have many things in common, including their great passion for phoning in and communicating. However, they are not a uniform group of actors. It is useful to distinguish various categories of callers based on their varying attitudes, practices, and the central issues that are dear to them. All these categories evidently represent ideal types rather than clear-cut divisions. They are based on differences that can either be further differentiated or grouped into larger categories. Let us now consider the main elements of each category.

The Men (and Women) of the People and Self-Declared Spokespersons *Grogneurs* usually call radio stations as often as possible to get their voices on the air and mark their media presence. Most often, their statements emphasise the freedom of expression and the need to address problems. Many of them address either the president directly or highly positioned representatives of public authorities. Most mainly discuss local issues and showcase themselves as actors who

enable local development, yet they do not shy away from addressing topical issues of national politics. They often perceive themselves as a kind of tribune of the people who speak on behalf of a wider community, either within their region or the country at large.

Mathieu Hontonnou, for example, is one of the most active *grogneurs* in southern Bénin. We may hear his voice almost daily, sometimes during several *grogne* shows each day. Mathieu mainly addresses problems of his local community (*commune*), Sèmè-Kpodji, such as defunct roads, missing electric lines, and the illicit sale of public real estate. He argues that this community has been somewhat neglected in terms of developing good infrastructure compared to its neighbouring community in Cotonou. Hontonnou wants to stand up for others; hence, his two nicknames, ‘man of the people’ and ‘servant of the people’, perfectly reflect his attitude.

Similarly, Romain Dagbomey from the town of Bohicon (see p.97) is ubiquitous on the airwaves almost daily. He considers himself the main speaker of people from a buzzing trading hub north of Cotonou.

These *grogneurs* are self-conscious and project themselves as important people who should have a say, one way or the other. Undeniably, people like Romain Dagbomey and Mathieu Hontonnou are passionate callers who feel compelled to convey important issues they are becoming aware of, similar to those who wish to ‘enlighten’ others. In their cases, they add further elements of self-presentation, such as proverbs and famous citations from politicians, to underscore their presence and distinctiveness. They employ rhetorical strategies such as ritualised phrases and a loud, distinct voice (see Chapter IV, page 101). Additionally, they utilise means of demonstrating their abilities and knowledge, for instance, by knowing crucial informants or having access to sensitive documents.

A typical case in point of those who claim ‘to act on behalf of the people’ is undoubtedly François Akplogan, a well-known *grogneur* operating in and around the town of Allada (north of Cotonou). He is a trader and small businessman with excellent relationships with various local businesspeople and authorities. His interventions primarily address local issues:

I was motivated by a request of people some years ago in my neighbourhood, and who were at that time very critical with the chef de quartier because there was too much dirt out there. I tuned in the *grogne* shows on Golfe FM and took the idea to call in as well, to Radio Allada. It was helpful because

after three of my interventions, they came to repair the street and cleared things up. (Allada, 22.10.2021)

The passionate caller For many *grogneurs*, it is apparently a simple matter of passion to call in. Sébastien explained,

I cannot stand a single morning without making a successful call to a station. It's more than a passion. I might be addicted to it, at least that is what my wife says. (Cotonou, September 2025).

In a similar vein, Jacques Avokan described his daily presence on the air:

Since I started this activity, without lying to you: there is not a single day I will miss to call in. Calling in, it is like a medication. Because when I hear my colleagues talking on air, I also do everything to intervene. Altogether, it is a bit expensive, yes, sometimes the money to pay the phone credit is later lacking for my lunch. (Cotonou, October 2021)

Jacques Avokan is a young man in his 30s, married with three children. As a trained photographer, he currently works in a mobile phone repair shop while dreaming of establishing his own photo studio one day. However, this aim is not easy, as people often simply take photos with their mobile phones these days. Jacques started phoning in to *grogne* shows some years ago. He usually connects to several radio stations. Jacques is a member of the listeners' club AFAS-3G associated with Golfe FM, located in the Akpakpa department.

During our interview, we listened to a *grogne* show aired by CAPP FM, with Philibert Abibou. Jacques constantly tried to reach the station's telephone line and finally succeeded. In his statement, he mentioned big scandals, such as the unfinished initial construction site of the national assembly in Porto-Novo¹. Jacques stressed that he felt an obligation to talk on behalf of all listeners for the sake of public affairs:

If you see something that is not good, you have to denounce it, without expecting anyone else to do it. Because it is our country, it's us, we have to put it right. (Cotonou, October 2021)

1 The first overambitious project was never completed, due to corruption, Le Matinal (2023). A new parliament building is scheduled for completion in 2026.

Often, the *grogneurs* expressed a desire to change things, at least on a confined local level, and they were motivated by small successes. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of all *grogneurs* interviewed noted the high gratification they received from fellow *grogneurs* and friends, colleagues, and neighbours who appreciated their actions. Therefore, they were motivated to talk on the air as well and as appropriately as possible. These *grogneurs* constantly stressed the passion they felt during these calls. Among them were often artisans (e.g. Sébastien Gnonhossou in Cotonou) and traders (Sanda N'Gobi in Perma) who felt that they should share the knowledge derived from daily encounters with numerous people in their offices or workshops.

To illustrate, consider the case of Abdel Wahab Tchassama, a tailor. Handicapped by an early childhood disease, he nevertheless managed to become a skilled craftsman and is a good Muslim. Today, as a family father, he has created a respectable small home in the neighbourhood of Cadjèhoun. Here, he is deeply connected to the daily life of many people around him. His workshop, called TCHASS-Couture, is the same place where he listens to the radio all day long and makes and receives his phone calls that draw attention to daily problems in his area and Cotonou in general.

Tchassama emphasised that he mainly speaks on behalf of the people in his neighbourhood: 'those who haven't the time to call'. Tchassama is very active on Facebook and WhatsApp and is a founding member of the listeners' club AFAS-3G. One of his primary motives for acting as a *grogneur* is to ensure a better position for handicapped persons in society. Thus, he wishes to defend his interests and those of others struggling around him in daily life (Cotonou, October 2018).

This category of *grogneurs* is mainly comprised of those who feel compelled to call in because of a need to convey the worries of their fellows, to speak out about what they would feel and think, and to reveal the problems of those around them. In many cases, they also advocate for a particular interest group. In the case of Tchassama, these are disabled people.

However, others also plead for ethnic minorities, such as René Leha. He was a photographer with a small photo studio in the centre of Natitingou in northern Bénin. He became an experienced *grogneur* who regularly called into Radio Nanto and occasionally Radio Parakou. Moreover, he was the primary representative of the Fon immigrant community in the Natitingou area. Having arrived in the region long ago, he maintained close links with all members of this minority. Known for his frankness and ability to speak clearly on cur-

rent affairs, journalists from Radio Nanto often visited René to obtain his statements to enrich their news. He died in 2019.

Grogneurs like Leha or Tchassama refuse to be reduced to a role of minority advocate. Instead, they view their interventions within the broader context of neighbourhood relations and problems affecting many others around them in their respective localities. Thus, they can be seen as spokesmen for others who represent a real or imagined community of malcontents. This category also refers to *grogneurs* such as Adam Bachirou in Parakou and Valentin Ayonou in Cotonou.

The field reporter Some *grogneurs* imagine themselves as field reporters, closely related to facts and events in their neighbourhood. Although they often repeat similar issues, they urge journalists to cover them or point out that they would do the job of the latter. In their rhetoric, they often add elements such as 'I am reporting from ...', 'this is your informant for the radio station', and other similar phrases. This type of *grogneur* tries to objectify the statement much better while being more precise. They do not intervene in every show but are present regularly. Here, we find *grogneurs* such as Eugène Ewagnignon (cf. 56), who can be considered a failed journalist, but also Vierin Hounigbo in Fonkounmè north to Ouidah.

For some younger *grogneurs*, the dream to pursue a journalistic career may be an option one day. A more pronounced way of assuming such a role of field reporter hails through the statement of that young *grogneur* from Parakou: 'I am Y.M. reporting from the big roundabout at Place Bio Guéra. Here, there are bad road conditions which have to be changed.' (Radio Arzèkè, 14 October 2021). However, this attitude of some *grogneurs*, which appeals to that of journalists, must not be confused with a general active role-taking as ('citizen') journalists (see the discussion on p. 151).

The concerned citizen This category primarily refers to callers who employ a similar type of rhetoric. Usually, they talk about very general issues and claim 'to be worried about the state of the nation'. Expressions such as *trop c'est trop* (enough is enough) evoke a general situation which they deplore, regardless of the particular issue the debate is meant to revolve around.

The concerned resident most often addresses the president directly and calls upon the political elite to immediately find a remedy to improve the situation. Usually, this kind of caller operates with comparisons (e.g. it's worse than under the presidency of the predecessor, it's worse than ever before since inde-

pendence, or it's worse than in other African countries) or with general conclusions (the government has totally failed to fulfil the promises made). Most of these callers are a little bit older, often retired civic agents or small shop owners. Among these callers, we also find those who laud the show as highly as possible; they politely frame their interventions before uttering trenchant, critical statements.

An eminent example was Jean Kpoton, a pensioned state agent. Once the head of a financial department in the Porto-Novo municipal office, he resided in one of the calmer quarters of Porto-Novo. Still interested in all political matters, he mainly called in at Soleil FM, where he was also a member of the fan club. In this regard, he publicly criticised the closure of Radio Soleil FM. Jean reacted to local issues while being troubled by the current state of society in Bénin. At the beginning of 2021, he was accused of forwarding false information and was sentenced to a one-year prison term (Ahéhéhinou 2021). Unexpectedly, he died in November 2022 (Akéké 2022).

Many *grogneurs* feel an obligation to hint at problems even at the expense of those concerned, such as Zakary Abdoul Baki from Parakou. He is a bricklayer who works on various construction sites. He calls almost every radio station in the region, including the state broadcaster Radio Parakou, and is now well-known among listeners and *grogneurs* in the region alike. He commented,

It is good to serve the truth. But that's not all you're making friends with. Honour as a *grogneur* is good, but you also make a lot of people angry.

Baki referred to a case in which he complained about intercity taxi drivers constantly being wrongly parked on the arterial road to Djougou. It was actually forbidden for them to pick up passengers outside of the new large intercity bus and overland taxi station. However, in competition with the drivers there, an increasingly larger number of drivers began to pick up customers right in front of the station and also directly in the street parking area. His repeated calls to radio stations to draw attention to this issue eventually led to the intervention of the city authorities, who initially curbed the practice. As a result, taxi drivers met him with considerable suspicion. At one point, his complaint was taken very seriously by the journalists at Fraternité FM. Together with an employee, they drove to a district where the lighting had failed (August 2022, Parakou).

The evolved educator These *grogneurs* clearly consider themselves to be in a position to speak on behalf of others, especially illiterate people, and they point to their particular abilities and knowledge that make them perfect *grogneurs*. Most often, they perceive themselves as even better informed than many journalists, and they justify their regular expression of the need to bring their voice to help the country as a superior position to enlighten others. They intervene in every 'classic' *grogne* show, but not all stations and shows simultaneously.

Rock-Yves Ahouanchédé, for example, was a well-known and very active and persistent *grogneur* in Cotonou. As a disabled person, he was often invited as a studio guest. He always measured his words and claimed specific knowledge when contacting authorities to inform them of current affairs. He saw himself as a kind of gifted person: 'I know many things about life that others don't' (Cotonou, October 2021).

This category comprises the largest group of *grogneurs* because it corresponds to a self-appellation. However, these people feel a need to clarify their positions in public to educate their fellow citizens. In many cases, these *grogneurs*, through their preferred topics and speeches, articulate a particular 'credo' (i.e. a type of agenda or conviction that they want to convey permanently).

Paul Chodaton, for example, sees himself as an advocate for local values and goods that come from Africa itself. His credo is to point out the importance of one's culture. This credo also includes the slogan *consommons local* (let's consume locally), combined with, for example, criticism of politicians who no longer wear traditional clothing. He repeatedly criticises the arrogance of politicians who do little yet earn high salaries. Furthermore, he assumes a stance as an educator, pointing to the necessity to respect the law, above all with respect to road traffic (various interviews, November 2021, November 2022, April 2023, and April 2025).

Likewise, Roland Gbemana has often urged people to use biodegradable bags for shopping instead of the harmful ones, in order to respect the environment.

Here, further distinctions are useful to help discern those who intervene only occasionally from those who are very active and call based on information they actively collect, edit, and prepare. The latter often do so on behalf of others. Finally, there are those who call in to pursue a scheme, which distinguishes 'the specialist' from 'the experienced information broker' and 'the manipulative and irresponsible *grogneur*', as described below.

The specialist This category is most often comprised of individuals who derive their motivation to call in based on specialised knowledge of specific sections of society, particular institutions, or current affairs. This knowledge is derived from their current or former professional activities or their involvement in specific public life activities (e.g. as members of electoral commissions and actual or former members of the police, such as Adrien Ahodi, alias Jules Agbodjéman, who formerly worked at Interpol-Bénin). They do not always intervene on any given topic, but they are certainly present when it comes to focused debates that touch upon their field of interest or special knowledge.

These specialists include, for example, Zakary Egounlety, a pensionary secondary school teacher from Porto-Novo, who is very outspoken on educational issues, and François Kantchenou, an IT specialist living in Fidjrossè, who can recognise manipulations on social networks more easily than other people. In this category, we also find retired individuals such as Hippolyte Kpèdotossi, an urban architect who has worked within the Ministry of Urbanism and possesses extensive knowledge of urban planning and projects, including the construction of a waterfront promenade (*corniche*) in certain parts of Cotonou.

These specialists prefer to report (not exclusively, of course) on problems in their area of expertise or feel particularly addressed by thematically focused call-in programmes. In some cases, these *grogneurs* deny journalists their expertise in this area altogether. Most are intellectuals. However, this group also includes devotees to music or cultural activities, as well as those active in civil society organisations, such as parents' associations (*associations de parents d'élèves*) and local development associations. Some of them capitalise on their professional experience and expertise, while others have chosen a field of specialisation due to a personal interest, which can distinguish them from other *grogneurs*.

Repeatedly, specialists speak out, for example, about public construction sites by pointing out that those charged with these tasks neglect their duties. In their areas of expertise, they feel more compelled to get involved, contribute their knowledge, and provide additional details. These people are often sought out by reporters in the field to comment on particular issues or as studio guests.

In this respect, Valentin Ayonou is a perfect case in point to illustrate this type of *grogneur*, who feels compelled to share a deep knowledge of environmental issues and public planning. Working as a driver in the Department of *Cadre de Vie* (Ministry of Living Environment), he notices problems on business trips and regularly reports them during *grogne* programmes, such as defec-

tive roads and unauthorised waste dumps, as well as larger public construction projects that are at a standstill. He has become a skilled judge of project quality, particularly in areas such as road construction and sewer installation. Thus, he strives to identify the root causes of problems during discussions with builders, residents, and authorities.

Valentin lives in Tchònvì, in a zone often affected by floods of the adjacent Lake Nokoué. He constantly criticises incomplete public works, such as insufficient sewage channels, poorly conceived roads, or inadequate urban management. He was a member of the callers' club to support Radio Soleil FM and continues to call in to CAPP FM and Radio Cotonou (interview at his home in Tchònvì, April 2023).

In various discussions, especially with those *grogneurs* who have benefited from a secondary school, vocational college, or even a university-level education, one ever-recurrent aspect emerged. Many of these 'intellectuals' were constantly highly critical of current affairs. Hence, they displayed their detailed knowledge and ability to detect basic political structures but seemed to feel a certain regret, consciously or not, based on these abilities, for not assuming a more central role in public life, either as a prominent journalist or state employee. From this kind of inner conviction, similar to that of those who aim to enlighten a larger public, a strong stimulus seems to drive them to intervene in radio debates.

The experienced information trader These *grogneurs* are comprised of people who call in almost every day on every radio station available, even to those in other regions of the country. These *grogneurs* do not talk about anything but try to be present on the air every day just to mark their importance as information brokers, who are known to many listeners and the authorities alike. Unlike the first two categories, their interventions are much better prepared and focus on a clear issue or problem concerning which they deliver details and facts. Most often, they prepare written statements and even rehearse reading them before making the call.

Nevertheless, unlike specialists, experienced information traders address a much broader spectrum of issues, either based on their wide-ranging interests in public affairs and politics or because they often speak to help others who provide them with information or sensitive issues.

Listening to the *grogne* shows between 2022 and 2025, I recorded the statements of renowned callers such as Clément Assolé, El Hadj Ramanou Gbadamassi, and Sébastien Gnonhossou, who voiced well-prepared state-

ments about tangible problems and scandals at selected airtimes. One was Herman Méton, who has repeatedly exposed the illicit sale of public property by regional and local authorities. He also frequently addressed the procedures in the wake of the above-mentioned ICC scandal, a massive nationwide Ponzi scheme that, after its failure, resulted in numerous people losing their savings (BBC 2019). In this respect, he expanded his role to become a civil advocate.

After the failure of this scheme, Herman lost considerable sums and acted as a spokesman for the spoiled people who mandated him to do so. In this role, he insisted on keeping the affair on the public and judicial agenda. When it finally came to the tribunal at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, Herman participated in all court sessions, provided information to the lawyers, and gave interviews. The trial against the main defendant ended with severe sentences and at least some compensation for many victims who were severely affected (BBC 2019a).

Grogneurs currently in the private or public sector are exposed to greater internal pressure than those who are already retired. According to my research, both categories comprise approximately 60% of all callers, which is certainly no coincidence. These *grogneurs* try to verify their information as best as possible to avoid legal problems while maintaining a good reputation.

In a similar vein, Sébastien Gnonhossou acts on behalf of those who charge him to convey their issues. While less than Herman Méton does, Sébastien often addresses unsolved issues within the public administration. From this perspective, he has discussed, for instance, the outcome of a large recruitment campaign for the military, in which numerous young people participated. After finishing their trial period, they were not following procedures, and there was no proclamation of those finally admitted, which resulted in much insecurity among the others. The situation ended only in March 2020, when the government finally considered them. Thus, these callers' interventions do not always align with their personal concerns. However, they refrain from conveying obviously false information or unjustified allegations.

The classification of the mentioned types of *grogneurs* (e.g. the man of the people, the wannabe journalist, the experienced information trader) applies with nuances and overlapping features. Apparently, these *grogneurs* prefer to uncover hidden problems by pointing to concrete cases and offering facts that they have previously carefully verified.

The calculating, self-centred *grogneur* These people are few. They often call in about any topic to denounce things whenever possible. These individuals also accept

benefits to maintain campaigns, for example, to defend a politician facing current problems or to support a particular vote. Nevertheless, it does not mean that they clearly take money to call in on whatever topic is desired. In many cases, they actually support the same case or the same political board as those who charge them to call in, but they do not care about the strong one-sidedness or partiality of their interventions. They are also intermediaries, as they receive, prepare, and then convey information often given by others, either in their neighbourhood or individually, purposely chosen for passing on information. Some of the more manipulative ones are known as such, but they would defend their action as ‘advocates as individuals’, similar to the role of lawyers.

In this regard, the trader Idrissou Liamidi Koumagnon in Cotonou is certainly a particular case. Nonetheless, he compares his activity with that of a lawyer and partly a private investigator. People who do not want help from other legal or extrajudicial paths often visit him. Often, civil disputes arise over real estate or unpaid invoices that cannot be settled.

In his office in the Akpakpa district, which also serves as the headquarters of his NGO, Koumagnon prepares files to investigate the problems of his clients. When a solution, such as a compensation payment from the other side, is not accepted, he threatens to openly disclose the relevant information in large-scale broadcasts. Koumagnon levies a kind of compensation in the event of success, similar to a broker. However, he also strives to perfect his abilities and, in his own way, to exhaust the communication flows in Cotonou. At the end of 2012, Koumagnon was imprisoned for fraud. He later reported on the circumstances of his detention during a live discussion on Radio FM Océan in Cotonou (26 August 2012, *Cartes sur table*) by explaining that the allegations were unjustified and intended to intimidate him (Cotonou, March 2013, November 2022). Later, he resumed his activities, admired by some fellow *grogneurs*, but met with reserve by others because of his often forceful stance (November 2022).

Evidently, each *grogneur* has features that overlap. The type of the ‘evolved educator’ may also be a specialised *grogneur* and can also often be assigned to one of the first two categories based on the main modes of talking and self-presentation on the air. Thus, these categories are ideal types that are meant to distinguish *grogneurs* according to the most visible (yet now exclusive) personal characteristics.

Conversely, devoted *grogneurs* share several characteristics, including a strong interest in social affairs, a particular preference for public interventions, and the desire for recognition. Considering their permanent intention

to improve their skills, some *grogneurs* may be considered as artists or (short) storytellers. Called upon to communicate information from the area of their personal expertise to a broader forum, some *grogneurs* see themselves as partners with journalists. More generally, most regard themselves as intermediaries on behalf of those who cannot use their real names in public. *Grogneurs* operate in exposed positions and are vulnerable and bold at the same time. Thus, between public recognition and critical suspicion, their activities should be examined from different perspectives to clarify their relevance.

From Hobby to Vocation: Inner Pressures and External Challenges

As seen in previous chapters, *grogneurs* in Bénin do not constitute a uniform type of media actor. They differ in terms of their personality, the topics they are most passionate about, and how they express themselves within the framework of radio shows. Nevertheless, they all have many things in common. Most share an attitude of outspokenness, with a strong dedication to voicing their views and contributing to the betterment of public affairs. They can capitalise on their rhetorical skills much better than any occasional callers.

Differences between them relate most of all to the degree of expertise they develop in thematic affairs and concerning the intensity with which they offer their contributions, spanning occasional or weekend *grogneurs* and those calling in several radio stations on the same day.

During my in-depth interviews, the *grogneurs* often pointed to a kind of inner pressure that would oblige them to call in to radio stations. Others described this habit as a fascination, a quasi-addiction that transformed an erstwhile spare-time activity into a daily compulsion and a need to be on the air. *Grogneurs* often feel compelled to speak out and raise their voices. This attitude corresponds to their self-characterisation as indispensable persons of radio broadcasting in Bénin and public life in general. For many *grogneurs*, calling is thus more than a hobby; it is a true vocation.

However, others explain their frequent calls by pointing to their social environment. People come to see them and discuss the importance of conveying information while urging them to call in, for example, when they are distressed about not receiving payments for their services, which they need to pay their bills. These external pressures represent a significant driving force.

Nonetheless, other frequent callers feel compelled by their personal, often emotional discontent. For example, the *grogneur* Abdul Razack Bokossa in

Cotonou stood up for the rights of a young girl and her parents after the girl was raped by her uncle. As the father of a young girl, Razack was resolute that this violation of norms should effectively be punished. A guilty verdict was pronounced after he personally struggled for it and spoke about it on radio programmes. He charged himself with publicising this affair (Cotonou, December 2023).

The activities of fellow frequent callers represent a challenge to many *grogneurs* as well, as the 'landscape' of *grogneurs* in Bénin is marked by both solidarity and competition over reputation. Therefore, it is unsurprising that many *grogneurs* listen to radio statements made by other *grogneurs* quite carefully to analyse their performances. Consequently, some *grogneurs* feel the need to call in to enhance the statements of others, to provide more relevant information, and to voice their opinions as well. However, a non-written 'working ethic' limits a potential contravention, as *grogneurs* refrain from critically commenting on the statements of their fellows live on the air. Whenever this actually happens, *grogneurs* reject such actions.

Hence, *grogneurs* are quite heterogeneous people concerning their professions, knowledge, and main motives for consistently calling into radio stations. However, they share a common endeavour to contribute to public debates, convey information for the betterment of everyday life, and enrich radio shows.

Careers, Constraints, and Risks

Cotonou, Missèbo, at Sébastien's workshop. During one of the Saturday morning *grogne* shows aired by CAPP FM, dedicated to security issues in Cotonou, the murder of a young girl was discussed. Here, Sébastien discussed the family of the victim, whom he knew personally, so he spoke emotionally about this case, which impressed both the host and subsequent callers (Cotonou, October 2021).

Basically, *grogneurs* noticeably expose themselves to the public. They face several risks, above all, being pressured by those they criticise and upsetting authorities and politicians. This pressure may range from intimidating phone calls the *grogneurs* occasionally receive to convocations to a police station and counterstrategies (i.e. to pay other callers to purposely counteract, dissent, and claim an opposite opinion), which can also involve formal legal proceedings.

Essentially, all citizens have the right to appeal to the HAAC or even a court in the event of a presumed defamation. Thus, *grogneurs* may face allegations when overdoing their statements, when they are not aware of the limits of their interventions, or when they are imprecise.

In 2023, journalists from Fraternité FM in Parakou had to handle such a case. During a morning *grogne* show, a caller made a complaint about the bad internal organisation of an NGO in town. Thereafter, the NGO's director argued against the allegations. Subsequently, two journalists from the station went out to investigate the issue. Finally, they detected that the caller had not given the correct interpretation of the situation. They issued a clarification during the next news show of their station to prevent further indictments (Parakou, July 2023). Nevertheless, such a procedure is time-consuming, an explanation that hosts of *grogne* shows, in cases of doubt, often advance to reject the statement entirely instead of opening such a procedure.

In other instances, opposing court cases have been dismissed because the *grogneurs* could successfully base their arguments on facts and proof, demonstrating that their interventions were within the juridical framework. In 2014, several *grogneurs* in Parakou were publicly affronted. The issue was *Le Privilège*, an edifice intended to host a hotel and a nightclub, which was poorly built and consequently collapsed. During some broadcasts, several of the most active *grogneurs*, such as Boni Gouda and Adam Bachirou, disapproved of the owner and master of the project for disregarding practical rules in favour of cost-efficiency. The latter denied these allegations. In turn, he accused these *grogneurs* and the respective directors of the radio stations of defamation. Eventually, the case went to court (La Nation 2014). All accused sides were released from these charges. In this case, the *grogneurs'* capacity to build their argument on clear evidence and investigation seemed to be valuable. Francis Akplogan, a *grogneur* in Allada, reported a moment when he was pressured by a district chief (*chef d'arrondissement*):

I found out that he had misused funds from the municipality, which were due to be used for water supply works in some villages, but he has diverted these for other purposes. People from a village called me, and I verified this problem. Subsequently, I was addressing the issue during a discussion show, and soon after, he was menacing me by phone. Soon after, I received a convocation, but I went to the *préfet* (department governor), where I could show the proofs, and the *préfet* had to acquit me since the district chief would not greet me anymore. (Allada, October 2018)

Conversely, the illustrious *grogneur* Adrien Ahodi (aka Jules Agbodjéman) was involved in several court cases where he was accused of defamation due to certain calls (e.g. in October 2010; cf. Bidossessi 2010). According to Adrien, he won all proceedings. However, he was prohibited from calling Golfe FM, a regulation based on their in-house law, since he had accused the broadcaster's journalists of being manipulative.

Rarely, prison sentences have been inflicted on *grogneurs*. However, in 2021, the well-known *grogneur* Jean Kpton from Porto-Novo was convicted (see above, p. 71), a case that most observers viewed as extremely disproportionate. Another case was Loth Houénou, a politically active *grogneur* who issued serious defamations and affronts. Eventually, he was required to serve a two-year prison sentence (Mensah 2022).

In any case, *grogneurs* should be well equipped to face potential allegations by verifying their information and the respective sources. Thus, the well-known *grogneur* Jacques Goutchoéssa (who unfortunately passed away in 2019, in Cotonou underlined,

You must do your investigations. If not, you may face legal consequences. Once I received a convocation to the police. I was accused of defamation; it was one of these affairs about the selling of public domains, but I had all the necessary references at hand and was acquitted. (Phone call, 29 January 2018)

Grogneurs must know exactly what they are talking about. Apart from their (ideally documented) experiences, they need relevant, reliable, and multiple sources of information (see more detail in Chapter V, p. 115). Furthermore, they must navigate a fine line between their capacity to address sensitive issues on the air and potential wrongdoings, which constitutes a challenge that is not easy to handle for many *grogneurs*. Sébastien explained,

They [the officials from the HAAC] say that raising defamations is against the law, although it is not always clear where the limits of defamation would begin. Nonetheless, some *grogneurs* were actually criticised for some minor issues. Therefore, not all people wish to take major risks all too much. (Cotonou, October 2021)

Grogneurs need to be aware of this risk while hoping to be heard by as many listeners and accountable authorities as possible.

Call-in Practices between Communication Routines and Self-Techniques

Through mutual exchange and by assessing the calls of others, many *grogneurs* have developed very clear ideas about what an ‘ideal *grogneur*’ is like. According to the most active *grogneurs*, a good *grogneur* is characterised by central features.

First, the ideal *grogneur* must be able to communicate clearly, be easily understood, and make precise statements. An ideal *grogneur* should be proficient in presenting content clearly and convincingly. Notes for preparation are useful. A good *grogneur* should not be too talkative, avoid distracting comments, and should get straight to the point of the argument.

Secondly, the ideal *grogneur* must master all issues that arise while speaking on the radio (*il faut maîtriser le dossier*) and ideally be familiar with all the necessary details, contexts, and implications of the facts and figures mentioned during a personal intervention, including evidence to support critical statements. Without proof, *grogneurs* put themselves, the host, and the radio station at risk:

People sometimes call in to address sensitive issues or those of friends. It is possible that you may accept the call, but you have to demand proofs; otherwise, the defamation may lead to prison. (Wilfrid Ahouassou, host at CAPP FM, Cotonou, August 2022)

The *grogneur* Moïse Ékanyé complained,

There are many people who are calling in who do not really know what they are talking about. They just want to destroy the image of some authorities. They should know what they are talking about. (Cotonou, November 2022)

In terms of on-air performance, a good *grogneur* is expected to be respectful while displaying a high degree of courtesy towards the show’s host. The *grogneur* must know exactly whom to address the concerns to (i.e. the respective person, such as the mayor, district head, or governor; the minister accountable for a certain domain; or a director of a governmental agency or state enterprise) and their names. When a good *grogneur* is then further interrogated about the issue by the journalist hosting the show, they must answer astutely and elucidate things further. A good *grogneur* should know how to address things properly. Barnabé underlined,

You need a certain intellectual level to develop such statements in an appropriate manner. We as *grogneurs* have established our way to investigate, our way to speak and our way to bring forward important issues in society. (Cotonou, April 2022)

Furthermore, *grogneurs* should not call in to radio stations without cause. Apart from quiz or request shows, a particular topic, or fact, a clear view on actual issues should be the centre of the on-air intervention. Just calling for the sake of calling, to make an all-too-general statement, to affirm what another caller said the same way, is considered by experienced *grogneurs* as void. Other fellow *grogneurs* mock these callers as those who want to be present on the air while unnecessarily occupying the phone line.

Grogneurs often refer to statements of their predecessors and concur with their opinions. Conversely, an unwritten rule is that callers avoid contradicting or arguing with each other directly on air. They may, however, raise a differing opinion when explicitly asked to do so by a host.

The most important characteristics that qualify an ideal *grogneur*, as repeatedly mentioned during the interviews, are authenticity, credibility, and comprehensiveness. The latter stipulation means that all statements made during the calls must be clearly uttered, verifiable, and coherent. Moreover, a *grogneur* must not lose the thread while focusing on the essentials and articulating the matter unambiguously.

The next term, credibility, is the most important attribute, linked with those displaying sincerity and a clear stance. *Grogneurs* must not constantly change their minds but stand by their assertions, even in the long term. Sébastien noted, 'You simply have to be sincere and stand by your stance' (*être droit dans ses propos*). Using the example of the situation of political prisoners, which was discussed more intensively from mid-2023 onwards, and linked to the hope of a presidential pardon, Sébastien insisted,

For a long time, I have already been criticising the fact that political prisoners should be released. Other callers have only recently started doing so. (Cotonou, December 2023).

In a similar vein, Sébastien consistently reminded his listeners that the government must cover the costs for dialysis patients, as the previous government had done (Cotonou, April 2025).

Regarding their relationships with governmental bodies, most *grogneurs* mentioned that during 1998 and 2006, the term of office of former President Mathieu Kérékou, *grogneurs* were often controversial persons but rarely became the target of investigations. Thus, journalists were more open to their calls. In contrast, since 2007, when the government was led by Boni and later by Talon, authorities exerted greater pressure on the media in general. As mentioned in Chapter I, critical media outlets became the target of legal procedures, which used minor deviations from the strict media laws to penalise them. The HAAC tightened its grip on all those who allegedly broadcast defamation.

Nevertheless, most broadcasters have signed agreements with the government (Assogba 2015a; Grätz 2015a). They must broadcast official announcements with sustained financial support while refraining from critical comments. Former subsidies from the HAAC have been stopped, and the market for advertisement is shrinking. However, the owners of several private radio stations have constantly feared being excluded from such lucrative contracts, so they have tried to avoid penalties because of critical utterances made by the *grogneurs*. Therefore, some calls were pre-recorded.

Talking to many active *grogneurs*, especially those whom I labelled ‘concerned residents’ and ‘specialists’, most declared that they very well knew what they were doing. They were aware of the inherent political risks and dangers, which they were prepared to face. These individuals were well aware of the various effects of this exposure, as they were publicly known persons who were at times controversial due to their statements, manner of speaking, and delicacy of the topics they often addressed. Hence, they more easily confronted potential accusations or open juridical affairs as they were prepared for such trouble because of their previous experiences or those of fellow *grogneurs*. As a result, they anticipated both the potential problems and the limits of such threats. This consciousness also helped them to continuously confirm their role as intermediaries by conveying information on behalf of others who might be less courageous and less experienced when talking on the air.

Women as *Grogneuses*

Regrettably, few women exist among the frequent callers in Bénin, with some noticeable exceptions. Most of these women (e.g. Symphorose Agbangbè, Solange Koukou, Georgette Akuesson, Agathe Nouantin, and Alexine Quénum) can be found in the country’s south. Most interlocutors explained

the rarity of women as callers to *grogne* shows for both cultural and practical reasons. According to these voices, women are not always actors in public debates because, most often, they do not want to expose themselves as much as men do publicly. Additionally, young women are less active, especially in politics (Alber 2025). Practical reasons include their lack of time due to many household and family duties these women must balance, from which men are largely exempt. Furthermore, other *grogneurs* mentioned their supposed lower ability to easily intervene on the air. Solange Koukou explained,

Women have greater difficulty getting a phone connection to a station. Me? I know about it. But it may be a matter of time as well, because often, you have to leave your deeds to phone in. And after all, you have to be courageous, you have to know all the details well to prepare your call. (Cotonou, January 2024)

These factors do not prevent women from calling in to radio stations in Bénin. On the contrary, they are very active in phoning in to other shows (e.g. greeting-and-request shows) and those discussing partnership issues. Nonetheless, considering *grogne* programmes, most women prefer to join the shows in national languages. Here, they seem to find a better space to express their worries.

Many women reported that men often mocked their limited abilities in French, a fact that also applies to many non-intellectual male callers, but which would restrain them from calling more often during the main *grogne* shows. Some notable exceptions, however, underlined the individual motives and gains women may derive from being an active *grogneuse*.

Consider Elisabeth Chabi at the time of an interview in 2018. This woman was in her 40s while struggling to make ends meet every day in Parakou by selling bread at the market and at the main overland taxi and bus station. Originating from Burkina Faso, she was eager to express her opinions and concerns by frequently calling various local radio stations. Some listeners mentioned her simple French, but most of them appreciated that a woman was that publicly active.

Elisabeth explained that she had only limited financial means at her disposal, so she could not call even more often. She felt constrained as she was living alone and had to cater to her children, including helping them attend school. Conversely, journalists often invited her 'as a female voice' to studio discussions as an interview partner. Elisabeth mentioned that her role had helped her to be elected as a representative of market women in public affairs. Elisa-

both gradually built a reputation for being relentless, candid, yet voracious in her attitude. She passed away in Parakou in 2020 (Agninnin 2020).

The active women who call regularly during *grogne* shows can be divided into four categories, according to my research data. The first category comprises many infrequent female callers who occasionally intervene when a topic appeals to them (e.g. education, health, and family planning). They may also have time (and credit) at hand, so they prefer to call in to programmes in French and national languages.

The second group consists of regular callers, who call into several radio stations at least twice a week, often to convey similar messages in both French and national languages. I previously mentioned Solange Koukoui, one of the few habitual callers in the greater Cotonou–Porto area. She is the owner of a small shop in the quarter of Kpoundehou, where she also listens to all radio shows all day long. Together with her husband and family, she lives in a small family house in Sègbèya, an eastern neighbourhood of Cotonou.

Active on the air since the early days of the shows on Golfe FM, Solange intervenes in French and her mother tongue, Mina. Today she calls into Golfe FM, Radio Wèkè in Porto-Novo, Radio CAPP FM, Océan FM, and Radio Diaspora, plus Radio Immaculate Conception, the Catholic broadcaster ‘mostly for greetings or during talks on religious issues’. Solange uses two mobile phones to reach the radio stations.

Solange emphasised that one must be quite persistent in establishing such a telephone connection, sometimes for about an hour, while being convinced about the activity. ‘You have to be courageous’, she added, a comment I often heard from experienced *grogneurs*. Listeners and the hosts know her well. The latter often called her by name by recognising her voice:

People often enter my shop to talk about issues in the neighbourhood. With my interventions, I feel that I may contribute to the betterment of things. Very often, authorities were trying to find remedies, for example, for defect lamps or wrongly stationed cars. (Solange Koukoui, Cotonou, March 2024).

Solange mentioned that the issue was a general nuisance, which also affected all small businesspeople in that quarter because clients could not easily reach the respective shops or services.

The third group is comprised of women with a good command of French, who prefer to call into French programmes only. With a decent educational

background, they often specialise in particular domains of social life, often in accordance with their vocational or associational background.

The last category is comprised of women who are most often quite attached to one radio station and one show, as well as its host, so they typically call in only during their preferred show. Among them is Julienne Tokponwe, known by her nickname, '*attachement du sucre*' (sugar cone), because she is a market woman in Natitingou who sells sugar. Julienne prefers to call in to Radio Cotonou during programmes related to family and partnership issues, which does not exclude her occasionally calling into Nanto FM and Radio Cotonou for discussion shows, such as *Échos de l'actualité*, which is broadcast weekdays during the morning hours.

In a similar vein, women often participate in weekday call-in morning shows that address current life issues and are broadcast in either French or national languages, such as *Contact* (in Fongbé) hosted by Nan Adoukonou at Radio Tokpa in Cotonou and *La matinale* (in French) produced by Radio Cotonou. However, the number of women who frequently call in during French-language programmes has decreased in recent years due to the discontinuation of dedicated telephone lines for women. To the best of my knowledge, in the greater Cotonou area, only Radio Cotonou currently still operates this service

Media appropriation, role-taking, and the public positionin of grogneurs

I have discussed several types of *grogneurs*, according to their main motives and attitudes on the air. These (potentially) overlapping elements of ideal types are only one possible perspective on the large variety of individual pathways to become a *grogneur*. Beyond the many common traits I detected earlier in this book, differences between them stem from the different age cohorts, experiences, and media preferences they exhibit. *Grogneurs* may develop individual pathways, media careers, or 'media biographies' (Gonser 2010), as a particular combination of the following:

- individual modes of media appropriation,
- active role-taking, and
- public positioning.

Grogneurs apply creative media tactics (Certeau 2007:207, Hörning 2001, Joas 2002) and develop particular modes of **appropriation** or the 'domestication' of media technologies (Berker et al. 2006; Silverstone/Hirsch/Morley 1992, Silverstone 2006, Hartmann 2008) to shape the public sphere(s) in a particular way and unfold their endeavours. In their case, these modes of appropriation refer to the active use of *grogne* shows in general. They may encompass aspects, such as the effective handling of radio frequencies, time, and topics. These further comprise the use of mobile phones and radio receivers, their rhetoric (see below), and a deep knowledge of all intricacies related to conducting *grogne* shows. These competencies are required to master these media technologies in a perfectible yet typical manner.

The concept of appropriation has meanwhile arisen in cultural studies (Bausinger 1980; Hirsch 1998), science and technology studies (Degele 1997; Dick/Wehner 1999), sociology (Geimer 2011), social anthropology (Beck 2001; Spittler 2002; Hahn 2004; Hahn 2011), and African media studies (Waltinger 2019, Krings 2015, Rieß 2019). Although the term has been recently used in relation to political debates on decolonisation (i.e. critiques of modes of cultural appropriation by dominant actors), it still offers a useful analytical tool in its media-scientific context.

Appropriation here relates to a manifold creative process of naming, using, integration (or refuting), adapting, and transforming any cultural item that is introduced from another context, including (new and old) media technologies. It enables the analysis of both social-cultural aspects that shape the daily use of particular (novel) media and the specificities of modifying these media in a given local context. Such modes of appropriation have been outlined in terms of distinguishing typical elements, phases, and typologies.

Most often, the concept of appropriation has been associated with specific social groups, including young people (e.g. Wegener 2008), journalists, or migrants. In recent years, criticism has arisen regarding an inbuilt cultural coherence (Verne 2007), as well as a preponderance of collective practices.

Therefore, Rieß (2019) proposed integrating individual media biographies into the analysis of typical digital modes of media use [in German: *Digitale Modi*]. Here, predominant types of media appropriation continually develop out of their individual emanation in terms of media careers, which, in our case, extend beyond the mentioned types of *grogneurs*.

Grogneurs have often stated in interviews that they have gradually evolved their engagement over time. Most of them started as ordinary yet frequent listeners, then they made their first calls to the radio station, which was followed

by further intensification of calls in terms of frequency and opinions offered. Later, they chose favourite stations and issues to raise, as well as the development of relationships with other *grogneurs* and journalists, while becoming increasingly more known to fellow listeners who have consequently commenced to charge them with their issues.

These *grogneurs*' constant presence on the air paves the way for becoming brokers who are sought after by those who want to convey information or want a solution to a social problem. Hence, these *grogneurs* become well equipped in developing pertinent calls beyond a simple statement, which is noticed by other *grogneurs* and journalists alike. This process of becoming a particular media activist, by appropriating the affordances of public radio shows, requires a certain perseverance, passion, and self-awareness of their realm of action, shaped by growing experience and recognition from others.

A crucial element that constructs the individual pathways of *grogneurs* is how they position themselves in public debates related to political issues and specific interests. An example is *grogneurs* who constantly act in favour of a particular interest group, such as handicapped people (Rock-Yves Ahouanchédé and Abdel-Wahab Tchassama), shop owners (Symphorose Agbangbè), and port workers (Mamert Azandosessi), as well as people spoiled by a Ponzi scheme (Hermann Méton), which has become an individual 'trademark' that forges individual personality beyond any *grogne* intervention. These activists are often invited to represent their groups on TV or radio shows or at tribunals (Hermann Méton). For those labelled 'specialists', they represent criminal affairs and the work of the police (Roland Gbemana, see p.118), matters of state security (the former presidential guard Paul Chodaton), and real estate scandals (Mathieu Hontonou) to comprise their individual *grogneur* identities. To a certain extent, this practice also applies to those defending the cases of women or vulnerable people.

Indeed, *grogneurs* must be careful in maintaining their reputations, which can become a problem if they are wrongly accused. In December 2021, well-known *grogneur* Moïse Ganhoutodé Ékanyé was arrested on suspicion of complicity in a money robbery at a diplomat's house, but he was later proven innocent (Chabi 2021). However, the case circulated on social media, which ensured that the residue of the scandal remained attached to him, which is often the case.

Such callers are respected among clients and neighbours because of both their services and public media commitment. In many cases, *grogneurs* began as regular listeners and then were inspired by established frequent callers to

follow in their footsteps. Thus, these beginners experienced initial gratification from being on the air, along with subsequent difficulties in keeping their places on these shows. Hence, they developed strategies to establish a phone connection, communicate comprehensively, and convey relevant information.

To summarise, the media biographies of *grogneurs* are composed of significant elements, such as gradually acquiring skills in appropriating media technologies and the rules of call-in shows, as well as practices of procuring information (see below) and strategies of active role-taking. The 'becoming' of any *grogneur* relates to individual steps of gradual intensification of calling in, which involves the adoption of the role of a public personality, with both full positive (i.e. renown) and negative consequences (i.e. exposure). These consequences may include bad experiences (e.g. lawsuits) and favourable ones (e.g. networking with other listeners and *grogneurs*).

All *grogneurs* have developed their strategies over time and gained experience. However, they may have also sometimes altered their main fields of intervention, for instance, from addressing deficiencies 'around the corner' to complex issues such as apparent embezzlement of public funds, as the example of Sébastien Gnonhossou aptly demonstrates.

Hosts and Their Dilemmas: Journalists and Interactive Radio Shows

The second and equally important category of actors who are central to the production of *grogne* shows is certainly the journalists who host them. What is their interest in hosting such shows? How do they manage to control the course of these programmes?

Let us first outline the position of radio journalists in Bénin in general. Unlike previous generations (e.g. those mainly evolving as governmental employees under the media monopoly of the state between until 1989 and others starting their careers both in the private and public sectors following the monopolisation of media outlets and the enlargement of that field after 1990), the contemporary generation of journalists capitalises on a multiplicity of options in the field of media (i.e. public, private, and community media), online publishers, and others. Conversely, they also face growing competition, commercialisation, and direct political interference by the state.

Working as a media professional in one of the state-independent media outlets generally does not pay well. Salaries are low (ranging from €80 to €250 per month), and working conditions are subpar. Consequently, numerous

journalists and technicians hold side jobs (Grätz 2015a). In addition, per diem payments from one of the numerous workshops to which media professionals are often invited as 'social multipliers' are seductive additional revenues. These are supplemented by pocket money for expenses that journalists may incur while covering specific events, such as meetings, press conferences, and opening ceremonies. In some cases, young media professionals succeed in gaining a formal position at the state broadcaster SRTB, where they expect greater financial security but are often hampered in their activities.

The competition between radio stations, especially in the larger urban areas of Cotonou and Porto-Novo on the coast and Parakou in the north, urges broadcasters to develop even more compelling programmes and promote talented presenters who can attract a large audience. Pressure and intimidation by state authorities are the daily bread of most journalists in Bénin. Therefore, most radio journalists try to avoid false allegations, and rumour-mongering as much as possible in their productions. Consequently, those with considerable experience or appropriate training are entrusted with controversial call-in programmes on their respective radio stations.

Some cases may illustrate this observation. At Radio Cotonou, for example, Benjamin Honoré Nahum (who was previously introduced) hosts the weekday open *grogne* show *Parole aux citoyens* and the themed Sunday programme *Franc parler* (sometimes hosted by Brice Bill Aïtchedji). Nahum was already part of the team at Golfe FM, which hosted the first national *grogne* show. Later, he became editor-in-chief at the information station Radio Soleil (both had to close at the behest of the HAAC) before becoming editor-in-chief at the city council station Radio Cotonou. He is often quoted by callers and fellow listeners as among the most truthful and impartial hosts of interactive shows in Cotonou. Although Nahum dominantly conducts the programme and always pays attention to compliance with the basic rules, he allows a certain opening of the show towards criticism in response to sensitive topics with a plurality of positions.

Philibert Abibou, employed at Radio CAPP FM, has also accumulated considerable experience, having worked in the newsroom at Radio Wèkè, a private station located near Porto-Novo. Later, he took over the position of editor-in-chief at Radio CAPP FM and hosts many discussion programmes, including *Le grand débat*, as well as 'pure' *grogne* shows. He also acts as the host of the interactive Saturday morning show, *Tribune libre*. Here, three major topics of the week are debated quite openly (see p. 38). For Abibou, it is a principle to act based on the law (*'Je suis légaliste'*) and not to question it as long as it exists. A relatively small circle of callers has developed around this show, which creates a club-like

atmosphere for discussing hot topics in society. As an experienced journalist, Abibou must ensure that his station does not get into trouble due to potentially defamatory statements. He made his position clear in a group discussion with several eminent *grogneurs* (November 2022).

Most radio journalists maintain an extensive network of friends and colleagues while capitalising on these connections to enhance their shows by incorporating relevant information and securing key studio guests. An important aspect is their ability to cope with technological challenges caused by inappropriate or defective devices and sudden power cuts. Many hosts of radio shows in Bénin maintain close relationships with their active audiences. People often recognise them in public, share their observations and critiques on the station's programming, and sometimes invite radio personnel for a chat over a beer. Conversely, radio professionals rely on their contacts with listeners when recruiting studio guests and collecting background information for news coverage.

Philibert Abibou, for example, frequently pays visits to residents in the district near the radio station, often during breaks, if he wants to eat or buy telephone cards. A little further away from the station is the bar of the Cinema Concorde, which he often visits because he always meets many acquaintances there, including colleagues, *grogneurs*, and other listeners.

Hosting a *grogne* show generally requires much attentiveness and a cool temper to handle provocative statements and announce when a *grogneur's* time on the air is over. Here, both experience and preparation matter. Most presenters prepare their shows meticulously, especially those with a more themed programme, while searching for information across their networks and messenger services and anticipating potential arguments and critical statements.

At the beginning of each show, presenters explain the central topics and then frame the ensuing debate to prevent callers from straying too far off course. A core tenet is that the presenters appreciate the callers' active contributions to these shows and even try to capitalise on the information they offer (see Chapter V). The presenters are expected to remain neutral, regardless of their personal political positions. Thus, they do not publicly display their political affinities on the air, although particular preferences may exist.

For example, hosts from Radio Planète often sided with then-President Patrice Talon, whereas those from Soleil FM (which was subsequently banned) were in a more critical position. The radio stations CAPP FM and, to a certain extent, Radio BIP are commonly perceived as neutral, while occasionally critical of the government, without acting in favour of a particular politician. Of

course, state broadcasters are often perceived as being close to the government, although individual journalists may enjoy a good reputation for being neutral and even critical.

A core tenet is that listeners frequently evaluate hosts according to their unique abilities to 'talk the right way' by using the correct expressions and addressing callers politely.

Hosting interactive debates, especially those featuring studio guests, often presents a dilemma: steering an engaging debate where both guests and callers feel included while respecting time constraints. Hosts are also especially compelled when it comes to the above-mentioned sensitive situations during calls, including apparent misstatements by callers, as well as their choice of words, insults, or overly harsh accusations against individuals. Consequently, hosting such a show represents a true challenge for some hosts.

Two aspects emerge from these reflections. Firstly, journalists, especially the hosts of *grogne* shows working at private radio stations, must strive to maintain their positions within the Béninese media landscape and their roles within their respective radio stations. In the face of strong competition amongst fellow journalists and the pressure to keep their programmes on the air, they must maintain a high level of professionalism while including a sense of performativity during their shows to attract as many listeners as possible. Furthermore, these journalists must do everything to avoid infractions, including defamations potentially issued by *grogneurs*, which can trigger interventions either by the HAAC, the ODEM, or even a tribunal. They do so by being well prepared to produce their shows. They improve their proficiency in important issues, and in some cases maintain useful relationships with some trustworthy *grogneurs* while preserving their on-air authority.

Secondly, journalists hosting these shows are often public personalities themselves, so they may influence public opinion and shape the public agenda by managing these shows effectively. They are exposed to critical regard, but they may also gain respect and sometimes even a celebrity status among listeners, politicians, and the wider audience.

To conclude this chapter, the main actors are not a uniform group of people, which applies both to *grogneurs* and hosts. We can distinguish various individual types and attitudes based on their primary motives and modes of expression when intervening on the air. In this realm of public display and competition, it is essential to capitalise on individual knowledge, as well as particular skills and strategies. These refer to various individual *grogneurs'* styles and rhetoric, as explored in the following chapter.

Figure 6: Philibert Abibou, journalist at CAPP FM, Cotonou, August 2025.



Source: Philibert Abibou, Facebook, 2025

Chapter IV: On-Air Performances

Calling in: Styles and Strategies

On Sundays at 9 a.m., Radio Bénin airs the political talk show *90 minutes pour convaincre*. Sébastien calls in to the radio station and starts his intervention politely by greeting the studio panellists and then discusses the difficulties of enlisting voters to register. Later, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the organisation of the show. During the call-in segment, the journalists keep their responses quite brief while potentially rushing through the callers' comments. Nevertheless, Sébastien continues to call in since the show has a nationwide audience and is listened to by many people nationwide (14 January 2023).

The success of *grogne* shows among its listeners is also based on the on-air presentation, the drama it unfolds, and the rhetoric involved. Passionate *grogneurs*, such as Sébastien, always strive to improve their ability to communicate their viewpoints on the issues at hand clearly and effectively.

Preparation Most *grogneurs* do not simply start calling in using their mobile phones. They instead invest time in meticulously preparing their interventions, given the short time frame they have on the air, during which they must clarify the issues and precisely address the points they wish to make. They revise their notes and consult the files on their smartphone. Indeed, it is not unusual for *grogneurs* to rehearse their intended statements several times to avoid trouble once they are on the air. Adam Bachirou, a *grogneur* in Parakou, explained, 'I do not want to stutter or make spelling mistakes' (Parakou, August 2022)!

Connecting with the station's phone line One of the most important factors for the omnipresence of the *grogneurs* is their ability to connect to a station's telephone line more frequently and easily than other callers do. While it is difficult for

many 'normal' callers to reach the station by phone, the *grogneurs* manage to make their voices heard on every show and every time of day. Many *grogneurs* use several phones to dial simultaneously, and they are apt at dialling just in the right manner at the right moment. According to many *grogneurs*, older mobile phones with buttons to dial are much faster for this purpose than newer smart-phones are. However, using several phones is only one aspect of their strategy. Apparently, it is also a matter of experience and timing, as Hermann Méton underlined,

I always wait until the precedent caller seems to come to an end of his statement, and just in that moment, I start my own call by pushing the button, after I have already typed in the number of the station. It is a matter of experience. I know who is rather short in his statement and who is not and which host usually adds a lot to a statement and who not. To use several phones may be helpful, yet you risk confusing yourself, and once you have the phone line and are connected to a technician or directly to the presenter, you have to start talking immediately; otherwise, he will cut you off. More embarrassing even would be a negative impression, when you are on air and talk kind of strange. (Cotonou, October 2021)

However, the use of several mobile phones is more common amongst those who try to intervene at various radio stations when the time slots of *grogne* shows overlap during the daytime, for instance, in the Parakou area, as well as on Fridays in Cotonou. Some stations, such as Radio CAPP FM and Radio Cotonou, do not allow callers to intervene more than once during the same show. Nevertheless, some *grogneurs* have also strategised by calling a second time from another phone number with a different voice and identity, such as Justin Sowadan, a *grogneur* in Natitingou (August 2023). Providing a name that differs from one's real name may also serve as a means of self-protection.

Notes, Records, and Personal Archives Many *grogneurs* use written notes for their intended calls. The main reason for this practice, which has also been noted among frequent Ugandans (Brisset-Foucault 2018), is the effort to be precise and comprehensible. Thus, they can use their limited airtime more effectively. Adam Bachirou (Parakou) uses a booklet to note his interventions. He argued,

All my *grogne* statements, I prepare by penning them down beforehand. This is especially important when dealing with complex issues. Keeping written

records is also useful for revisiting issues. It is important to prepare an intervention also to avoid exceeding the time limit on air. (Parakou, July 2023)

More accurately, the aforementioned *grogneur*, Herman Méton, has recorded all his statements over the past eight years and archived them in his office. This strategy also aims to refute unjustified accusations (Cotonou, 15 October 2021). However, Sébastien Gnonhossou usually keeps track of his interventions by recording them on his smartphone (Cotonou, August 2025).

Getting Attention: Staging and Rhetoric Strategies

One of the most striking features of many *grogneurs* is their rhetoric and their on-air performative habits. These are part of their strategies to seek attention (see below) while effectively engaging with politicians, audiences, and journalists and establishing their personal brands (see also Selormey 2012 for the Ghanaian case). Notably, most *grogneurs* start with the same formula: they mention their names, along with places of residence and workplaces, while adding an individual greeting. For instance, some *grogneurs* prefer to introduce themselves with a solemn speech.

One of the most well-known cases in this regard is certainly Romain Dagbomey, a *grogneur* in the large trading hub of Bohicon who always commences and closes his statements with similar words:

‘Bonjour, Madame la Journaliste. My name is Dagbomey, Romain, from Bohicon-Kpatalokoli, automatically not far from Hotel Dako. This morning, I have some concerns to tell you. My first concern – listen well, Mr Head of State, Head of Government, Mr Patrice Talon ... this morning, I would like to say that ...’ He usually ends all his statements as follows, ‘It’s Dagbomey Romain, Kpatalokoli: Bohicon, see you soon, God willing’. (e.g. Atlantic FM, *Je n’aime pas ça*, 16.3.2018)

Romain Dagbomey holds a position as a musician at the prominent church *Église du Christianisme Céleste*, where his father was a regional leader. He is well known across southern Bénin because of the ritualised opening of his interventions and because he calls almost every radio station, as well as some Parakou broadcasters. In an interview, he boasted of calling regularly to TV stations, including international channels. These distinct introductory statements are

emblematic also of many other *grogneurs*. Asked about the significance of such openings, Dagbomey mentioned, ‘Everyone has its own tone (*chacun a son cri*); listeners will automatically recognise me’ (Bohicon, October 2018).

Sébastien Gnonhossou usually addresses a radio station with a kind of honouring formula (e.g. ‘*force municipale de Cotonou, bonjour*’) to start the conversation with the host of Radio Cotonou, the broadcaster in that town (i.e. municipality). He explains this approach as a mark (i.e. a brand) every *grogneur* uses to be instantly recognised by both hosts and listeners. Additionally, *grogneurs* mention their current locality, such as Roland does: ‘Here is Roland Gbemana from Ahogbohoulé!’ (neighbourhood of Cotonou). He explained:

Just when I am starting my intervention, I am determining my place. It’s just a manner of talking, it is a habit, and a way to mark my presence. (Cotonou, October 2021)

Conversely, Emile Hounnouvi usually introduces himself as ‘the one phoning from the town of the white woods (*la cité des bois blancs*)’, a colloquial name for the town of Athiémé, west of Cotonou.

Rhetorical strategies also include the citation of proverbs. *Grogneurs* utilise them to make their arguments more convincing. For example, on 8 March 2018 (*Qu’en dites-vous*, Soleil FM), the caller Dieudonné evoked the following proverb: ‘When two elephants are fighting, it is the herbs which will suffer’. Here, he referenced the unwanted side effects of the current teacher strikes: children who could not attend school and their parents who paid the school fees yet feared the invalidation of a complete school year (*année blanche*). The two elephants were the teachers and the government; it took many weeks before they came to an agreement. Other *grogneurs* later used the same proverb.

Another typical proverb that implies another meaning and has also been used by many *grogneurs* is, ‘You cannot cook omelettes without breaking the eggs’ (*On ne peut pas faire d’omelettes sans casser les œufs*). This proverb suggests that, often, negative side effects are inevitable and must be accepted when good projects are underway. This reference was once used by the highly active *grogneur* Mathieu Hontonnou. He referred to a meeting of the president with the heads of the major religious congregations to explain his measures for clearing public places of unwanted religious manifestations. This policy would not please everyone (*Qu’en dites-vous?*; Soleil FM 2.3.2018).

Furthermore, on 30 January 2018, frequent caller Valentin Ayonou started his message with the following words: ‘We are in Bénin, and we must call a cat a

cat and a dog a dog' (*Nous sommes au Bénin, et nous devons appeler chat-chat, et chien-chien*). This statement inferred that things needed to be clearly addressed, not in a disguised manner. Another typical saying is, 'They should put a little bit of water into their wine,' which is used to express, for example, a wish for others to argue less rigidly in a discussion.

A *grogne* show on CAPP FM discussed the still-lingering tensions between Bénin and neighbouring Niger after the coup d'état in that country in 2023. Hence, Sébastien used a biblical quote to argue that the strict public response of Bénin's President Talon, which sided with the official disapproval of the coup by the Economic Community of West African States, had caused more trouble than necessary. He noted that one should have clearly expected counter-action by Niger's authorities, including the closure of the border between the two states. Sébastien quoted a verse from Ephesians 6, which disapproves of any threatening (*Tribune libre*, 26.7.2025).

Furthermore, in a show again on CAPP FM (*Tribune libre*, 24.10.2025), Paul Raoul Zinsou quoted an expression from the late eminent Bishop Isidore de Souza, who once presided over the National Conference in 1990. De Souza had appealed that no bloodshed should follow political tensions at this moment of transition. Thus, Zinsou used this statement to refer to the vivid debates that followed the national electoral commission's exclusion of an oppositional candidate from running for the presidency (TRT 2025).

Such proverbs, famous quotes, biblical notes, and comparisons form part of 'a good talk' in Bénin, especially during public meetings. Here, they are an element of the *grogneurs*' individual 'styles': typical, recognisable ways of addressing a given topic, with the use of local idioms, which adds a special spirit to these shows. Additionally, *grogneurs* may occasionally switch over to national languages to add commentaries or aphorisms that are difficult to express in French. Furthermore, new expressions in the Béninese version of French also appear (Assogba 2015b).

A general feature of almost all *grogneur* interventions is their practice of directly addressing and naming accountable people in administrative and political positions. Here, they usually refer to the full name and exact position related to the issue at stake. In this regard, many callers directly turn to the country's president or the mayor of a town, the district head, or directors of governmental offices. This identification is often followed by an urge to work more efficiently, which underlines their accountability. A typical example includes, 'I appeal directly to Commissioner Dédodji' (*J'interpelle directement le commissaire Dédodji*; Hounsou Prospère, Atlantic FM, 17.1.2018). Moreover, callers may di-

rectly address the head of state: 'My first concern goes directly to the President of the Republic. I speak to him with the greatest respect' (*Ma première préoccupation va directement au Président de la République. Je l'interpelle tout respectivement*; Frédéric Soubrouaté, 31.1.2018, Atlantic FM; *Je n'aime pas ça*).

Some *grogneurs* have argued that this formalising attitude is more than politeness since it is meant to underline the seriousness of their grievances. Expressions such as '*Monsieur Patrice Guillaume Athanase Talon, chef de l'état, chef du gouvernement*' are undoubtedly intended to imitate the way official media refer to the president, as a ritualised way to express honour and importance. Furthermore, these modes of addressing important issues are driven by the (not unrealistic) expectation that those addressed will personally listen to these statements (e.g. the documented case of former President Yayi Boni; cf. Sossou 2018).

In other cases, mentioning exact names and titles, such as '*Monsieur le Maire de la commune*', may underscore the expertise of an experienced *grogneur* in understanding an issue and the specific responsibilities of the authorities involved. Indeed, several *grogneurs* use to start their interventions most often with rather pathetic statements and appeals, such as '*Mister President, the country is ill, the people do not eat*' (*Monsieur le Président, le pays va mal, les gens ne mangent pas*; Paul Hounkpatin on Atlantic FM, 22.2.18, *Je n'aime pas ça*), before finally pointing to quite tangible problems such as defunct roads.

Raoul Zinsou once declared, '*Monsieur, the Director of the SONEB, do you intend to poison the people?*' This opening augmented Zinsou's grievance about the obviously bad quality of the drinking water provided by this supplier in his home region (1 September 2025, Peace FM). In one declaration, Nicaise Atchadé addressed both the president and the female host of a show by avowing,

Madame! It is not right in the country now. It's not good. Oh dear! [...]. *Monsieur le Président*, you have to intervene! Madame, that's not good! It's serious! Madame! (Atlantic FM, 16.2.2018)

Similarly, Solange Koukou often starts her declarations with, '*Mister President, the country is suffering!*' (*Monsieur le Président, le pays souffre*), or '*Does the president know what just happens in the country?*' Laure Attiogbé often introduces such an expression as '*my cry of the heart*' (*mon cri du cœur*).

As mentioned earlier, in an even more solemn kind of speech, other *grogneurs* address all listeners at once, with expressions such as '*Good morn-*

ing, Béninese people!' (*Bonjour peuple béninois ! Mathieu Hontonnou*, 09.04.18, Golfe FM, *La grogne matinal*), or 'Béninese and Béninese! Listen to the cry of the heart of the people, which is suffering greatly! Always call the *grogne matinal*! The people are suffering, it's not right!' (Symphorose Agbangbè, 3.4.2018, Golfe FM, *La grogne matinal*). This loud, highly emotional, yet appealing way of speaking is typical of the renowned Lady Symphorose Agbangbè (see below) and other, mostly elder *grogneurs* in Bénin, such as Nestor Avononmadégbé. They often use an additional moral appeal to address general issues. Symphorose (deceased mid-2022; Zinsou 2022) was always quite solemn in her calls. She began almost all of her statements with, 'Dear fellow citizen!' (*Chers compatriotes*). Most often, she made general statements, such as, 'Today's young people just don't want how earlier, work properly, there are too many criminals among them' (ibid.). 'Where is the world going?' she would ask again rhetorically.

However, some *grogneurs* have expressed their disapproval of such a speech act. For instance, Romain Dagbomey said, 'Only a president is entitled to this way of speaking', which would be a pretension. But [in the case of Symphorose] after all, it's OK. We are fine with that. It's her tone' (21 October 2020).

Other characteristic expressions many *grogneurs* use, especially in contexts of disapproval, are 'The country belongs to all of us!' (*Le pays nous appartient à tous*) or: 'We are not sheep' (*Nous ne sommes pas des moutons*).

Typical rhetoric includes an open self-confirmation, especially when issues resurface after being previously discussed. Here, typical statements include, 'I have been addressing that problem already for a long time', and 'We have been screaming because of that in our *grogne* calls, but nothing happened' to stress their perseverance.

First interventions by callers In most cases, first callers are well-known *grogneurs* who can reach the phone line as quickly as possible and start their statements with typical opening words. They greet their hosts noticeably politely (while often addressing the studio technician of the day), praise the host and the show while underlining its significance, and then introduce their issues. Most callers greet the presenter of the show personally with either a first name or family name (e.g. '*Bonjour, Monsieur...*'). Further examples include the following:

- 'Mr eminent journalist, good afternoon. I greet you and your technician on duty'.
- 'This is Mathieu Hontonnou, the servant of the people'.

- (To laud the radio station) 'Power of the municipal administration, good afternoon!'
- 'Today I am addressing the Director General of the National Electricity Company, with all due respect'.

Often, when the phone line is interrupted for whatever reason, the host typically says, 'Oh, he (or she) has left us on tiptoe' (*sur la pointe des pieds*).

In some cases, *grogneurs* and some hosts of *grogne* shows use nicknames on the air. The host of the *grogne* show, Samuel Elijah at Atlantic FM, for instance, was often called 'Uncle Sam'. Victorien Azandoté from Radio Planète enduringly uses the title 'Docteur Vazo', which is also his name as an artist and actor, whereas Wilfried Ahouassou is frequently called 'Willy'. This practice is meant to convey a sense of intimacy. However, it may be misleading, as the hosts of these shows often dislike or are unfamiliar with these expressions or, at the very least, their appropriation by people they do not know very well.

Conversely, *grogneurs* use a variety of sobriquets, such as 'man of the people' (*l'homme du peuple*, Mathieu Hontonou; a perfect self-image of his posture) and 'the unavoidable' (*l'incontournable*, Lucien Ayonou). Hosts often introduce 'the Imam' (Moussa Alidou) or simply 'the professor' (for Zakary Egonlety). Both refer to the current or former occupation of these *grogneurs*.

Addressing Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, *grogneurs* meticulously address their concerns towards those in office (e.g. the president, most often with his full name and title), including the mayor, the accountable minister, or the head of the national police. Thus, they demonstrate their perfect knowledge of the administrative landscape and establish the 'seriousness' of their calls. Furthermore, they use typical formulations for structuring their speeches:

- 'I have three concerns. First of all, my first concern (*préoccupation*) ..., then my second concern ...'.
- 'What do I want to say today?'
There is also a typical rhetoric to reinforce the argument:
- 'Those responsible should think carefully about this (they should look at their copy)'.
- 'Think about the social that should be at the forefront'.
- 'I say: do the essential before any luxury (*l'essentiel avant le luxe*)'.
- 'Consider the situation of most Béninese in the country'.

Ultimately, there are typical formulas for counterarguments:

- ‘This is not true!’
- ‘We do not agree with the way it is done!’
- ‘With all respect, the way to do this is not appropriate!’

Repetition When analysing *grogne* shows with more intensity over a specific period,¹ it became evident that some *grogneurs* frequently repeated the same statements, sometimes for weeks. It is not uncommon for these people to read out the same text repeatedly, in hopes that their message will finally be recognised.

This practice has two effects. First, this attitude may help uphold some issues on the public agenda. Some complaints raised by *grogneurs* that became subject to such repetitions included unsolved problems related to the general recruitment of customs agents who were suspended because of cases of corruption (*concours de la douane* 2015; Sébastien Gnonhossou and Solange Koukoui), as well as a similar problem regarding the recruitment of students for an engineering school in Savalou (Barnabé Agbekponou and Pierre Hounkpatin). Other issues were the then-unfinished persecution of the people liable for the aforementioned ICC scandal (Jacques Avokan and Ramanou Gbadamassi), the scandal of the unfinished construction of a new building for the National Parliament (Jean-Baptiste Adjovi), and the bad working conditions and insufficient payment of street cleaning women for the municipality of Ouidah (Emile Hounnouvi).

The second effect is that these repetitions may leave other listeners and journalists, however, feeling bored. Nonetheless, they acknowledge the perseverance of these callers and the pressure their issues may exert on the authorities involved. Recently, Paul Raoul Zinsou repeatedly mentioned (on Radio Cotonou and CAPP FM) the closure of a parastatal enterprise in Porto-Novo that produced schoolbooks (*Imprimerie CNPMS, Centre National de Production des Manuels Scholaires*), which resulted in unemployment among former

1 These periods spanned over the months of September to October 2018, April to July 2022 and February to March 2024. Here, I was able to record and analyse almost all major *grogne* shows aired by Golfe FM, Radio Cotonou and CAPP FM, plus many other shows produced by Radio Parakou, Radio Fraternité Parakou, and Radio Bénin on a less regular basis. Despite the quite different audial qualities of these recordings, I usually listed all callers and their issues and transcribed selected calls and interactions.

employees. Sébastien Gnonhossou often hinted that the costs for dialysis treatment were no longer covered by the state, contrary to previous governments (April–August 2025).

A side effect is also that *grogneurs* brand their names, mark their positions, and enhance their reputations and notoriety (which is not always appreciated by all listeners). Finally, this method of repeated calls helps the host to lead the shows. Samuel Elijah, a long-time host of *grogne* shows at Atlantic FM, explained that this repetition makes these shows perhaps boring, but it helps the hosts who already know the *grogneurs* to better anticipate their interventions and understand how to handle them (Cotonou, October 2021).

Some *grogneurs* may be commissioned by those who charge them to express their worries, to repeat these calls. Indeed, this repetition may bore some listeners, whereas others appreciate the tenacity and perseverance of their efforts. It is, nevertheless, a means to underline the importance of one's interventions by mentioning (real or supposed) achievements, for instance, by insisting that repeated statements led to the repair of a defunct road.

Finally, some *grogneurs* are notorious for overdoing their statements with a high and loud voice that departs from a moderate style. Others are notorious for speaking either very slowly (partly due to age-related issues), such as Hippolyte Kpèdotossi, or extremely fast, such as Alassane Garba from Kandi, who aims to convey as much information as possible in a short period of time (telephone interview, August 2022). Consequently, hosts fear these takes may spoil the show.

On Friday, 4 April 2020, during the show *Questions actuelles* (9 p.m.), Lucien Dossou provocatively asked a caller, Paul Chodaton, whether his planned statement would be comprehensive, even before the latter could start his intervention, as he often discussed his feelings that overwhelmed him. Of course, Chodaton replied with much amusement, but he obviously tried to temper his statement throughout his talk (CAPP FM, April 2020).

Forms of self-assertion Part of the ritual is that the host often tries to recognise callers' voices using a simple greeting by guessing their names before they can begin to properly introduce themselves. Honoré Nahum from Radio Cotonou appears to be especially gifted in this regard, as are Philibert Abibou (CAPP FM) and Victorin Azandoté, also known as Docteur Vazo (Radio Planète, *grogne* shows in Fongbé), who also make an effort to guess callers' names, which generates considerable esteem among their listeners. When a host successfully guesses the name of the caller, the latter often answers with '*affirmatif*' (in fact).

Most callers then continue their interventions with a very kind, formal, and polite approach, greeting the host, acknowledging the technician, lauding the station, or uttering wishes (e.g. on New Year's Eve), while thanking the host for the opportunity to voice their grievances.

Some callers add compliments to honour the host. For instance, Paul Chodaton addresses Honoré Nahum from Radio Cotonou as 'our Alain Foka', which refers to one of the most prominent journalists from RFI, who has hosted call-in shows for decades. Most often, the host is also polite while inviting the caller to express their statements similarly. In some cases, well-known *grogneurs* are eventually flattered by some hosts, who mention the frequency of their calls, their often first position on the air (Sébastien; Zakary Egonunley), or their strong voice (Anselme Kpindjo).

However, this politeness does not prevent the listeners from becoming more polemical as their declarations continue. Some typical statements include, 'In which country are we actually?' (*nous sommes dans quel pays*), often used by Solange K. and Barnabé A., or 'This is not normal!' (Sébastien, François). More dramatic forms include, 'Mister President, forgive us. We are on our knees' (Solange), concerning the subject of the Law of Helmets (26 February 2024, CAPP). This approach also includes mentioning formative suffering: 'I have six children. I can't afford to buy six helmets for all of them because we also have to eat' (Claude Kakanakou, via *Allô BIP*, BIP Radio, 28 February 2024).

Closing To end a contribution, *grogneurs* use typical words such as, 'It's all for today' or 'Until my next time'. Rock-Yves Ahouanchédé's interventions often ended with similar words: 'For this day, I turn off the tap' (*Pour ce jour, je ferme le robinet*). Moreover, Hermann Méton often concludes his remarks with a reference to his further enquiry, marked by suspense: 'More on this issue next time' or 'I will get back to the matter soon'. These rhetorical elements serve as a marker of identity while gaining attention. Referring to Goffman (1959: pp. 132 et seq.), they can be seen as a mode of impression management.

Insertion: *Grogneurs* in Changing Economies of Attention

Many of these strategies and attitudes are related to growing competition amongst the *grogneurs*, as well as amongst all media actors in the country. As the analysis of my interviews shows, this competition influences the options

and strategies of most *grogneurs* in gaining the necessary public attention and securing their public voices. One of these strategies is the choice of broadcasters to reach a broad audience:

Apart from Radio Fraternité FM, I prefer to call Radio Parakou. It's broadly listened. They broadcast at Friday, 10 o'clock, and Monday, 16 o'clock. It is followed in the entire north of Bénin and neighbouring countries. (Adam Bachirou, Parakou, July 2023)

Georg Franck (1998) coined the concept of economies of attention to merge socio-psychological perspectives and an analysis of changing media economies (Lanham 2007). It begins with the assumption that attention is a limited resource. In the realm of media studies, these insights complement the theory of agenda setting (Rössler 1997). More recently, Bleicher and Hickethier (2002) further developed Franck's approach by examining the media industry and technological options in general.

In our case, I argue that listeners have several options to follow various media, as well as grant their attention to the individual statements of *grogneurs*. To augment the probability of gaining attention, radio hosts and *grogneurs* constantly cooperate to increase their perceptibility and distinctiveness on the air. To make the shows even more appealing, they are supplemented by additional elements from the station and the presenters.

Openings Each show starts with an opening jingle (*générique*), most often produced at the radio station. Sometimes, excerpts of recorded statements by callers follow, combined with significant music (see below). An example from BIP Radio Cotonou is,

'Allô BIP Radio, the free airtime event on your radio. BIP Radio opens its microphones to you from Monday to Friday from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m. Take the air, express yourself live on the subject of your choice, without defaming, by dialling 52526767' (recording BIP Radio, February 2024).

A particular tune stems from Radio Arzèkè in Parakou. For many years, the station used an excerpt from a speech by the former President Boni Yayi from 2012 as an opening jingle on the workdays' *grogne* show, in which he said, '*Il faut dénoncer!*' (one must criticise). Here, he seemed to encourage people to speak openly about their grievances, a statement that appeared somewhat contra-

dictory to his media politics. The piece was then repeated several times during the show to further justify the relevance of the programme.

In February 2017, the technicians replaced the intro by inserting an intriguing yet authentic statement from a small child criticising local authorities due to damage in his neighbourhood. Opening jingles and opening statements then set the stage for the subsequent, often effusive, statements from the callers while underscoring the relevance and prestige of this show. Meanwhile, the sealed broadcaster Soleil FM announced the respective *grogne* show on workday afternoons, *Qu'en dites-vous?*, in the following manner: 'Every day from 3:10 p.m. to 3:55 p.m., Soleil FM is yours to listen to. Call in to share your views on development issues.'

Of particular significance is the choice of musical titles, most often aired at the beginning and the end of a *grogne* show. For instance, Golfe FM often used to start the programme *La grogne matinal* with a song by the well-known musician Stan Tohon² *Saisis ta chance* (Take your chance), which calls for active participation while avoiding hate and defamation. Moreover, the mentioned *grogne* show *Qu'en dites-vous* usually opened with politically minded African pop music, which also helped bridge the breaks between callers.

The choice of the respective titles is also significant. For instance, the song *Gérez les tensions* by Ivorian reggae star Tiken Jah Fakoly was used several times when the subject of debate revolved around popular protests. Radio Arzèkè FM in Parakou, for example, made a similar choice to start the *grogne* show within the morning programme *Bonjour chez vous*, apart from a recorded statement of the president (see above), with a sample of the title *Je dénonce Babylone* from reggae roots singer Meta which includes these appealing words: '*C'est la dictature qui s'appelle démocratie*'. Such a reference to critical Rastafarian-styled African pop culture was also chosen to open the morning *grogne* show *A vous l'antenne*, aired by Peace FM in Cotonou, most often followed by the tune *Plus rien ne m'étonne* (Nothing surprises me anymore) created by Tiken Jah Fakoly.

Furthermore, CAPP FM opens the Friday's *grogne* show in French most often with *To Tché Wè*, a title from the African Salsa Orchestra, led by prominent musician Michel Pinheiro. It was created in 2016 with both song lines in Fongbé and French. Here, interest in improving the condition of one's country is expressed musically. The station starts the interactive show *Tribune libre* on Satur-

2 Stanislas ('Stan') Tohon, who died in 2019, was famous for his popular Think-System (or *tchinkounmè*), which blended local rhythms and instruments (e.g. calabashes) with European and Caribbean tunes.

days with the header *C'est le peuple qui parle* (It's the people who speak) by rapper Radama Z. Moreover, Radio Parakou, throughout its Friday and Monday shows *Les auditeurs en ligne* airs tunes from the popular singer G. G. Lapino, including *Ça doit changer* (It must change), a song that comprises moral pleas.

Similarly, the song *Je rêve d'un Bénin prospère* (I dream of a prosperous Bénin) by singer Young Marley usually opens the show *La grogne matinal* on Radio Nanto FM in Natitingou. Subsequently, the show's host greets the listeners and reminds them of the 'rules of the game': above all, to avoid all kinds of defamation while remembering the limited time allocated to each intervention.

Interruptions As I mentioned earlier, the presenters of these programmes must avoid making defamatory statements or unjustified accusations against callers. Otherwise, the station may be fined by the HAAC based on complaints from affected individuals. However, during live shows, problematic interventions represent a challenge for every host.

During the *grogne* programmes on Radio Parakou (i.e. *Nasuba* and *Les auditeurs en ligne*), the hosts constantly repeat that only opinions 'in the sense of development' should be expressed, without regard to 'politics'. This statement apparently indicates that callers should not criticise government policy in general but instead name specific problems, preferably those that can be solved directly.

For almost all *grogne* programmers, hosts from more liberal, neutral stations (e.g. CAPP) as well as those from state media (Radio Parakou) note that criticism of private persons must be avoided, in contrast to expressions concerning public institutions and the local authorities. I suppose that in the event of such accusations, private persons are more protected by legal procedures. They may also remind them of the limited time allocated to them or ask for a more moderate intervention. When these attempts fail, the host often politely interrupt the caller and say, 'Thanks, we have taken notice of your issues, thanks for your call. There is another listener on the phone line. Hello?'

Nevertheless, this step is not easy to take because, in most cases, the caller is unhappy with the procedure and continues to talk and argue. Consequently, a possible smooth course of discussion to that point in the show may be brutally interrupted by a disturbance that will affect even the most superficial listeners. Thereafter, the host must do everything to calm the situation and return to a professional mode of handling further incoming calls.

Closing Finally, each statement ends politely with similar words that first reiterate the caller's name and the place of the call, along with some good wishes to the host of the radio station and, often, to all other listeners. In addition, they use typical farewell or ending formulas, such as 'I close the tap for today', 'I give you back the aerial', or 'that's all for today! I'll come back to you soon.' Then, the host thanks the caller before taking the next call. At the end of each show, the hosts of most stations (e.g. Radio Planète and Radio CAPP FM) summarise all interventions and repeat the names of the callers and their issues. Often, hosts greet frequent callers who have not been able to call, again a sign of respect and interdependence.

Hosts' flavour Of course, the hosts' approach, conversational skills, and rhetoric are also crucial elements for the success of these programmes, especially during live broadcasts. This approach begins with a clear introduction. For example, Benjamin Honoré Nahum (Radio Cotonou) opens each morning *grogne* broadcast with a quote from an important writer (e.g. Oscar Wilde) or philosopher, which adds a philosophical note. Other presenters intersperse personal elements. For instance, Philibert Abibou (Radio CAPP FM) often uses proverbs and greets acquaintances. In cases of personal concern, he endorses reports from the *grogneurs* with his experiences. Serge Ayaka from Radio Bénin conducts the dialogical conversation during the thematically focused show *Échos de l'actualité* in a humorous style.

Rachida Houssou takes considerable time for each caller during BIP Radio's weekday open *grogne* programme, *Allô BIP*. Callers are first greeted warmly, including an exchange of wishes and small talk on personal conditions. Additionally, greetings are sent to the residents of the caller's respective location. During the show, callers are invited to express a tangible issue, which is then often followed up after the show by the station's journalists calling the respective authorities or making subsequent visits on the spot. During subsequent shows, concerned listeners often inquire about the state of affairs of their cases. Presenters then must appease them if the case is still awaiting official statements, pending further developments. However, the danger of raising expectations too high is always present.

As mentioned above, *grogneurs* monitor their performance, as well as those of their peers, by listening to rebroadcasts of *grogne* shows or audio recordings on mobile phones and WhatsApp. Adam Bachirou, a *grogneur* in Parakou, mentioned,

To hear a rebroadcast is important. First of all, you cannot always follow the entire show in its first edition. Furthermore, you have to detect your mistakes in order to prevent them. Man is not God; man can make mistakes. It's good to know it, to do better. (August 2025)

The rebroadcasts offered by some stations in Cotonou and Parakou serve the *grogneurs* as an important tool for self-control and monitoring their fellow callers. This approach also creates an ongoing competition between frequent listeners in terms of public presence and effectiveness. A closer look at their daily practice shows that their performances consist of a series of elements that they must master to achieve fame.

Grogne Shows as a Drama

The above-mentioned elements (i.e. shows always broadcast at the same time, with the same introductory and opening jingles, musical elements, similar forms of address, almost the same participants, moments of dramatisation, and similar closing formulas) create ritualised sequences typical of these shows. It is obviously a public media ritual (Liebes/Curran/Katz 1998; Pross/Rath 1983), but it is also more than that. I argue that we should analyse these shows as a media ritual while considering their larger context, their place within the media landscape, and the broader political culture in Bénin in general.

In my reading, each of these *grogne* shows can be considered and analysed as a drama, in the proper sense of the term. Drama refers here to a repeatedly performed and ritualised sequence of expressions and interactions, which are in large part purposely staged by all actors involved. They all follow a kind of (unwritten) script that sets the stage, clarifies their positions, and conveys information. This definition intends to accentuate the performative aspects of these shows that make them highly recognisable.

Many listeners and the surveyed *grogneurs* also feel that how conflicts are resolved during a broadcast is an important feature. In the event of differences of opinion, presenters should be firm but polite and seek understanding, for example, by pointing out insufficient evidence and formulating a possible contradiction to the caller's statements in a comprehensible manner. Moderation is important, as the general rules (e.g. no personal accusations, insults, false information, or serious accusations without proof) are reiterated, along with

the unfortunate reality that not all callers can be accepted. Hosting a successful *grogne* show also entails maintaining a disciplined dialogue and respecting the standards of rhetoric, a crucial element of the public sphere in West Africa (Ige/Motsaathebe/Ochieng 2022).

These collective elements make *grogne* shows a particular mediatised public drama. Conversely, the shows are much more than playful performances, as the issues addressed must be both pertinent and based on veracity. Consequently, *grogneurs* must master the sources they use for their statements and use them as precisely as possible. In this regard, the following chapter sheds light on *grogneurs*' strategies to obtain information. It starts with explaining their situation in other regions of the country, explores their relationship to fellow *grogneurs*, journalists and administrative authorities, before discussing their public role in Benin today.

Figure 7: Members of the listener's club and the station's director, Radio Nanto FM, November 2024.



Source: Courtesy of Ezéchiél Yotto, Natitingou

Chapter V: *Grogneurs* in Changing Media Environments

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'¹. These threats led to fewer *grogneur* interventions on the

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*)². 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 broadcasters³.

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

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-Gbégamey 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 2024⁴, 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

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 list⁵.

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

5 Among the 40 awardees were El Hadj Ramanou Gbadamassi, Georgette Akueson, Mamert Azandosessi, Hermann Meton, Barnabé Agbekponou, Clément Assoclé, 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 Épiphanie 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 Boriyouuré. 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 Boriyouuré / 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 Boriyouuré. 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 Bénin 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 prisoners⁶, forced evictions of settlers for public infrastructure works⁷, and the financing of political parties⁸. 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 Chodaton 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 Chodaton 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 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

Chapter VI: Intermediations

Information Brokerage: Theorising the Role of *Grogneurs* in Bénin

August 2022, Cotonou-Missèbo. Some businessmen who own several flats around the area came to see Sébastien. Sébastien had assisted them in achieving their agenda. Tenants of furnished flats moved out while stealing some furniture. Sébastien helped identify those who had done it by discussing the affair on the air. He acted to support these landlords because he knew best how to address the issue. Sébastien only mentioned the initials of those inculpated to avoid any suspicion of defamation. In this case, he was active as an intermediary for their cause, yet his statement on *grogne* shows was intended to alert other landlords, often ordinary people who invested in houses as a retirement income. Additionally, he cautioned the authorities to be vigilant and avoid such issues.

This chapter analyses the role of *grogneurs* within the broader context of shifts in the media landscape in Bénin, as well as the place of participatory media in the realm of web-related and mobile communication technologies that also challenge traditional mass media. It is evident that media landscapes in Africa have undergone significant transformation, driven by the ongoing process of the integration of new media technologies (Hydén et al. 2002; M'Bayo/Onwumechili/Nwanko 2000; Nyamnjoh 2005, Vidali 2008, Tudesq 1999, Njogu/Middleton 2009, Wasserman 2010). Both new and social media, driven by the growth of the internet and the increasing use of mobile phones, offer media professionals and users novel communication opportunities, which enhance the affordances of the latter and gain new importance for generating media content.

This development concerns the assumption of an increasingly active role by the audience or media users (broadly speaking, it includes listeners, readers, and viewers) in the design of media productions in general, which is not

limited to digital technologies. This role can be seen in a variety of ways, from the idea of potential target groups that influence media strategies to increased TV quotas, from public talk shows to 'Big Brother' programmes, and from tele-voting to reality TV and social media (Carpentier/Schröder/Hallett 2015). In addition to analysing media content and its appropriation, a significant strand of research in media studies focuses on the increasing participatory role of media users.

Numerous authors have posited that the roles of media producers and users are increasingly converging. This phenomenon is purportedly being promoted by new media technologies, influencers, social media, and the process of media convergence (Thompson 2013). This issue mainly applies to new media as 'collective' or 'participatory' media (Carpentier 2011).

Several key features of that co-production of media content are evident in the context of contemporary radio production in sub-Saharan Africa. They include stringers' communication with journalists (via mobile phones and internet channels), call-in shows, and feedback content via social media and websites, as well as involving listeners as co-hosts of broadcasts. In this context, Axel Bruns is credited with coining the key concept of 'produsage' (2008, 2007). Hence, the terms 'producing' and 'usage' are fused to create a concept that operates under the assumption that producers and users are effectively indistinguishable in many new media environments¹.

However, are the *grogneurs* also such producers? In our case, the *grogneurs* certainly play their part in producing media content. Conversely, only two factors mentioned by Bruns apply to their daily activities and interrelations.

Firstly, the shows are produced through open participation. Secondly, the related media content is unfinished, comprised of a continuous series of small, ever-emerging dramas, which are to be continued the next day. However, the property (in terms of the rights to disseminate and further use these shows) is exclusively retained by journalists and radio stations. It is common practice for individual *grogneurs* to record a show and then copy the file onto their mobile phones or other MP3-enabling devices. Thus, they can circulate these elements via WhatsApp groups or Facebook sites while avoiding any further usage.

Nevertheless, media anthropologist Elisabeth Bird (2011) was more cautious regarding the usability of this term. She argued that in most cases, these

1 Bruns determined four key features of produsage: 1) open participation and joint evaluation, 2) liquid heterarchy based on merits, 3) unfinished artefacts created in a continuous process, and 4) shared property and individual rewards.

people comprise a minority of passionate media activists. In contrast, most people, most often by choice and due to a lack of time, knowledge, and resources, largely remain passive media consumers. In addition, the power of dominant media actors, such as corporate enterprises, news agencies, and international broadcasters, often outweighs that of individual activists.

In contrast, Erin Meyers' (2012) case study revealed that hitherto established professional hierarchies can be questioned when non-professional media actors develop novel forms of media participation. Conversely, more closed media formats lead to a clearer separation of roles, as seen in the format of conventional television broadcasts (e.g. Big Brother).

On a more tangible level, many recent works in the realm of media studies have referred to active media users who provide relevant information via guest articles, blogs, self-made videos, and YouTube channels and often operate in more authoritarian media systems or (post-) conflict settings. Many authors have assigned these activists an essential, increasingly crucial role in these media systems by considering them equal to media professionals. Keywords for this perspective include 'citizen journalism' (Banda 2010; Bruijn 2016; Campbell 2015; Dupuis 2016; Goode 2009; Nduhura/Prieler 2017; Mutsvairo 2016b; Salawu 2013; Thorsen/Allan 2014; Wall 2019), 'alternative journalism' (Akinfemisoye 2014)², (Akinfemisoye 2014) and 'guerrilla journalism' (Dare 2007).

However, we need to be more precise when discussing the special position of the *grogneurs*, their strategies, and their relationships with journalists and the wider public, both 'on stage' and 'behind the stage' (Goffman/Weber-Schäfer 1973). *Grogneurs* are, I argue, not 'citizen journalists' (cf. Banda 2010; Ogola/Owuor 2016), as they and others would mostly refute such comparative designations and any parallels to the role of (professional) journalists (see below).

From an analytical viewpoint (Baud 2004), several differences exist regarding the diverse dispositions of the two groups of actors, mainly in terms of power differentials, professional strategies, and modes of public accountability. *Grogneurs* are neither journalists nor simple citizens, as their role is more pivotal than just serving as additional or alternative sources of information.

2 Serena Miller (2019) primarily referred to users of digital technologies and described the work of citizen journalists as follows: 'People with no news-media organizational ties have taken advantage of the convenience and low cost of social computing technologies by publishing their own stories and content' (op.cit:1).

As seen in Chapter III, they mediate between different social and media actors (e.g. ordinary listeners, neighbours, friends, concerned citizens, and instigators), as well as journalists, the authorities, and the broader public.

Moreover, the concept of citizen journalists is far too large to describe a specific role. They operate in a particular, often awkward, exposed position, as well-known yet tangible actors of information brokerage. From this position, they may derive personal benefits (e.g. a good reputation and occasional financial gains). However, in most cases, their work is a means to develop their personalities and pursue careers as media activists in various forms, as shown in Chapters III and IV.

Their activities as information brokers must be understood in a broad sense, as brokerage is an intermediary role that has become permanent, in various ways advantageous, and a form of monopoly, at least in the context of radio shows within the context of Bénin. Their activities differ from professional information brokers and respective firms, which act as consultants and experts while constantly trading in data, contacts, and networking capacities in the realms of politics, lobbying, business, and entertainment (Thalen 2011) as an entrepreneurial strategy. In most cases, they include the additional quality of individuals who have previously held professional positions and are engaged in various other activities.

Furthermore, *grogne* shows cannot be straightforwardly linked to processes of democratisation, as is an open participatory media forum. However, *grogne* shows and their protagonists, *grogneurs* and journalists, contribute to the creation of new communicative spaces in Bénin. In their pivotal role, the *grogneurs* especially constantly mediate between various public spheres: the informal public sphere(s) of personal encounters, the digital mass-mediated sphere(s) of social media and mobile messenger services (especially WhatsApp forums), and the classical mass media, mainly FM radio.

Each of these spheres inhibits divergent logics of communication and participation. Here, I employ a functional-structural concept of public spheres, which envisions sub-spheres with different scopes and of exchange (Gerhards/Neidhardt 1990; Neidhardt 1994; Merten 1999). Regarding contemporary West Africa, the original model of Gerhards and Neidhardt (op.cit.) must of course be altered and extended to include spheres that are constantly being produced anew in terms of internet-based (i.e. virtual) communication and those that are developing in terms of social media and digital mobile forms of communication platforms (Gustafsson 2019; see also Godulla 2017; Taddicken/Schmidt 2022). The latter represent informal, virtual forms of communication and have

also become increasingly important in Bénin over the last decade, especially in urban areas (Assogba/Koulete 2022).

Moreover, the importance of those spheres related to semi-public places (e.g. pubs, markets, and small gatherings) where relevant information and rumours are shared remains quite high (i.e. the already mentioned so-called *radio trottoir*; Ellis 1989, Nkanga 1992). Frequent callers, such as the *grogneurs* in Bénin, bridge several of these (sub-) spheres by conveying information across these levels, for example, by publicising personal information that they received during individual face-to-face encounters. Thus, they enhance networks of urban communication. They share aspects of the roles of journalists, but go beyond the latter, as they are mostly active on a multitude of spheres of communication simultaneously and purposely utilise these in a skilled manner.

In our context, the intermediary role of the *grogneurs* notably mediates between relatively passive media users, who either want to use or generate information and other users of public media, as well as professional media creators such as radio hosts. They may help those who do not want to or cannot call in for themselves. Thus, *grogneurs* somewhat represent others' interests with limited responsibility (e.g. they can be commissioned to articulate the concerns of others without pursuing these matters further, similar to lawyers. However, they articulate these concerns in an appropriate, media-effective form. Thus, they support those who either do not want to expose themselves for fear of sanctions, as well as those who are unsure of the correct way to call in, or as a conscious strategy of social positioning.

This intermediary role can extend beyond radio calls. For instance, in Bénin, the most frequent callers deliberately distance themselves from journalists and other media players (e.g. employees of public relations departments of NGOs, occasional writers, and bloggers). In this respect, too-hasty 'assimilation' results in a loss of these empirically clearly recognisable boundaries and positions in everyday life.

Hence, as an alternative, I propose an actor-oriented concept that can be well introduced into social and cultural anthropology and applied to different contexts: the notion of the **broker**. A broker is someone who, in a narrow sense of the word, may gain advantages from bringing together and mediating between different persons and interests.

However, *grogneurs* are more than simple mediators. They are information brokers in both a narrow and a broad sense of the word. In the narrow sense of the word, *grogneurs* convey information and critical points of discussion, even

‘trade’ with these in their own way (not that much financially, but in exchange for other information, public attention, and recognition) at the levels of encounters and the mass-mediated public sphere.

My conceptualisation includes the use of this notion in a broader sense of the word. Here, I primarily refer to its use in social and political anthropology (Lindquist 2015, Bräuchler/Knodel/Röschenthaler 2021), where a broker is discussed as someone in society who creates and maintains social connections – often between non-relatives and members of different social strata – and generates benefits of various kinds (far beyond material advantages) from such activities. In other contexts, brokers are referred to as those who initiate, accompany, or even accelerate dynamic processes of change.

For example, Bierschenk et al. (2001) used the term to describe actors in Africa who mediate between developmental agencies and local residents while managing to attract projects, support services, and financial aid (Lewis/Mosse 2006). In other cases, the term ‘cultural broker’ is related to those who mediate between actors of different (e.g. ethnic, regional, and political) origins, including interpreters, cultural entertainers who convey new cultural trends (Thalen 2011), and those who introduce new media technologies (Gilberds/Myers 2012).

Grogneurs are information brokers as information is the most valuable asset in their activities, drawing from diverse sources and social fields.

Nicaise Atchadé, a *grogneur* with a degree in agriculture, recalls,

I was once told that an elderly market woman in the big Dantokpa market in Cotonou was in trouble. Someone was claiming the same booth. I investigated the matter and found that the market management should have done a better job of solving the problem. Before going public, I visited the director and asked him to help her. In the end, she was reinstated, and I stopped talking about it on the air. (Cotonou, November 2022)

In another case, Nicaise felt compelled to address specific discrepancies. People in a village where he runs a farm were being forced to pay an extra fee to be connected to the electricity grid by a contracted agency. In July 2022, he publicly denounced this practice and asked the parastatal electricity firm SBEE to intervene, although to no avail. Despite making the issue public, the inhabitants of the area did not receive compensation, which, according to Nicaise, demonstrated their vulnerability (Cotonou, November 2022).

Furthermore, *grogneur* Maurice Ogouchi complained that student grants were not paid on time. Since he was not a student, he pursued a clearly inter-

mediary role (July 2025). However, *grogneurs* often ‘commission themselves’ to address issues without being approached by those concerned.

This approach often does not work well when addressing state actors (i.e. governmental and municipal authorities), as their representatives are often happy to pass on responsibility or competence while sometimes simply not fearing any consequences. Thus, the immediate effectiveness of their interventions, in terms of changes to problematic issues, may be limited. Nonetheless, exceptions to this concept also exist. For example, the already mentioned repeated negative reports about the state hospital ultimately led to an inspection, after which those responsible were transferred or dismissed.

Grogneurs as media activists

Consequently, *grogneurs* help intensify information flows while recreating information as an important asset or even a good within society. This good may sometimes become quite rare or abundant. In either case, it must be constantly reproduced and preserved in economies of attention in Bénin today.

As seen above, *grogne* shows can potentially create a close relationship between professional and non-professional media actors. These include strong links between journalists, active radio users, and sometimes benevolent authorities. Nevertheless, I also described these relationships as quite ambiguous. First, journalists need *grogneurs* because they help the former produce shows with broad appeal. Journalists also need *grogneurs* as informants. Most of the former, however, would refuse to assign the latter a position of equality simply because of their limited training in generating relevant information and presenting it on the air. Furthermore, journalists often highlight the limited degree of normativity of the *grogneurs*’ activities and their lesser accountability that allocates them too large a room to manoeuvre.

For example, Frank Kpochème, the former president of the journalist association UPMB in Bénin, acknowledged the vital role of these active callers within the Béninese media landscape. However, assigning *grogneurs* this role would not discharge them from a high degree of responsibility in verifying their information while avoiding any abuses (October 2021). Conversely, *grogneurs* often point out the unequal share of information brokerage between themselves and the journalists. Adam Bachirou argued,

The work of a journalist – no, it is actually even more than that, what we, the *grogneurs*, usually do. We are often the ones who give firsthand information, and they are often just waiting for our news. They use our information for their work. They are the ones who benefit from us, but they often treat us badly. Not all of them, some of them are trustworthy, those are the ones I will call to obtain information. (Parakou, August 2023)

My analysis shows that both journalists and *grogneurs* strategically strive to maintain their particular positions. They maintain the requisite room for manoeuvring in public. *Grogneurs* are neither journalists, citizen journalists, nor small-scale politicians. Although these roles have been assigned to some of them, I argue that these comparative terms actually confuse the debate rather than clarify their role. *Grogneurs* are radio activists in Bénin and intermediaries in the double sense of the word. They mediate between different public spheres and various interconnected actors in the media field and beyond. They most often speak on behalf of various individuals to convey their concerns while initiating debates on current societal issues or, ideally, proposing solutions. They may become information brokers when they try to capitalise on their position and role, not in terms of monetary gains, but regarding the standing, reputation and social capital they derive from their mediating and networking activities.

Hence, in their role as brokers, *grogneurs* offer information to other listeners, which is broadcast on radio programmes to gain public recognition and a good personal reputation. Conversely, they offer their insights from these experiences in public communication to various people (e.g. in a role as facilitators at public events and information campaigns). Thus, these *grogneurs* are just more than stringers. Considering the style of their interventions, the ritualised and staged character of their utterances as part of a radio show, they are also popular actors in the theatrical sense of the term. From a broader perspective, they are media activists and information brokers.

The subsequent and final chapter summarises these and other central points of my book.

Chapter VII: Conclusion

Listening to *grogne* radio shows is a great way to keep up with current events in the Republic of Bénin, whether you are in the country or travelling abroad. They provide vivid and compelling descriptions of everyday life. I have listened to the voices of Sébastien, Clément, Valentin, and Ramanou, who have been regulars on various radio stations for many years. Getting to know them personally – at home, as well as in their workshops or offices – adds a special flavour to my memories of fieldwork in Bénin, with all the surrounding smells and noises.

I recall sitting next to 'One Two', the tyre vulcaniser, near his workshop on the main road in Natitingou, and spending time at Adam Bachirou's workshop, located near the Zongo market in Parakou, where people frequently passed by to greet each other and discuss current events. These *grogneurs* – including the female counterparts, the *grogneuses* – are emblematic figures in the Beninese media landscape, alongside eminent radio journalists such as Philibert Abibou, Honoré Nahum, and Rachida Oussou, who host these interactive shows. All those involved in the co-production of these interactive radio shows share a strong commitment to public communication, often against all odds. They clearly contribute to the participatory nature of these radio programmes, even if media participation, in the dimensions developed by Carpentier (2011:69) is here 'minimalist' or, to emphasise the more active and voluntary nature of media participation typical of *grogneurs*, rather 'selective' and mostly limited to content and performance. In any case, it does not blur the boundaries and power differentials between radio professionals and non-professionals.

Many current works in media and communication studies mainly focus on online media activists. In this context, my book also makes a plea not to neglect media actors associated with 'classic' media (e.g. radio) and their significant programmes. Indeed, the *grogne* shows enjoy great popularity in Bénin's vibrant media landscape. They demonstrate that people in Bénin are not indifferent to shortcomings and problems in their social environment, although

some issues might incline an observer to sarcasm. *Grogne* radio shows are appealing because they often address sensitive issues and benefit from a particular interplay between mass media, digital platforms, and informal, private communication networks. They remind us of the radio's ongoing pertinent role as a classic mass medium, despite the emergence of social networks and messenger services – at least in countries such as the Republic of Bénin, where the radio remains the top mass medium.

Today, both official and unofficial information circulate much faster and across a variety of media. Thus, the *grogne* radio show format adds another dimension to this ecosystem of communication, which can only be understood as related to different sites, actors, and information sources, shaped by new media technologies and expanding communication spaces.

The *grogneurs* in the Republic of Bénin have considerably refined their practices in recent years in terms of veracity and persuasive power, so they are indispensable to urban networks of communication. They intervene in both national and local affairs due to their direct concern and social tangibility. Both *grogneurs* and journalists play a significant role in a process that involves a growing articulation and interrelation of various public spheres at different levels of communication (e.g. local, national, virtual, personal, and broadcast) based on a particular convergence of 'classic' (e.g. radio) and new (e.g. mobile) media technologies.

From a functional-structural perspective on public spheres, I argue that *grogneurs* play an intermediating role by connecting different sub-spheres of communication (Chapter VI, p. 154). *Grogneurs* are present almost daily on various radio stations, so they manage their share of the changing economics of attention. They are neither stringers, media assistants, nor journalists in either a 'conventional' or 'modern' sense of journalism, including digital journalism. The *grogneurs* are not just comprised of annoyed and 'concerned citizens'; they develop and maintain public communication strategies. Although some of them may abuse their roles for personal gain, most of them are committed to veracity and honesty. Furthermore, *grogneurs* act as information brokers, as intermediaries between mass media, the authorities, and the general public. In Bénin, their role has evolved in the context of media liberalisation, which extends far beyond the scope of democratic participation.

Grogneurs are networking media actors who operate in the interstitial spaces between traditional conversation, radio journalism, and mobile and social media usage. They are part of a vibrant civil society. However, despite sharing similarities, they cannot be conceptualised as either 'citizen journal-

ists' or 'popular performers'. Indeed, *grogneurs* must be honest and authentic by basing their interventions on veracity and exactness. Nonetheless, unlike journalists, they do not have to adhere to the editorial line of the media company but also do not abide by the same deontological standards as journalists.

This uniqueness is part of their 'code of conduct'. They often differ from journalists in the nature of the issues they raise, which are often overseen by the latter. Further differences lie in how they present themselves on the air since they are often one step ahead of journalists (not in the sense of breaking the news but in presenting urgent matters promptly), as well as in their role as mediators. Despite their potentially precarious and exposed position in society, they continue to act as central media activists who turn passion into civic engagement. For the moment, *grogneurs* remain tied to the radio, and few of them are likely to become independent influencers.

Grogneurs in Benin are mainly men, as women often have less time to make repeated calls and are hesitant to expose themselves in the media. This difference corresponds with a continued male preponderance in the national public life, which results in *grogne* shows being less balanced than we would like. Conversely, different to other cases (e.g. Brisset-Foucault 2018 for Uganda), they rarely have political mentors, or aspire to become politicians.

Returning to our initial question, what explains their success and relevance? Even though social media will ultimately prevail, the position of the *grogneurs* as information brokers will also endure, mainly due to their steady veracity and personal integrity. This role offers the *grogneurs* advantages, including psychological benefits (e.g. fulfilling a passion or vocation), social benefits (e.g. a good reputation and access to debate forums), and sometimes, material benefits. In Bénin, *grogneurs* may also communicate via social media platforms or messenger services, either in written form or via audio messages. However, in the context of the country's current rigid media laws, they are cautious not to assume and relay premature or incorrect information from social networks. In some cases, they have even attempted to counteract the misinformation circulating there.

Grogneurs are media activists, using radio platforms to actively improve their social setting. They often lend their voices as advocates for community members unable to call in or those fearing the consequences of disclosure. Their continued relevance is secured by their relentless pursuit of critical public issues, which they address with directness. Ultimately, they offer radio journalists a powerful stimulus for dynamic, interactive programs and provide them sources for coverage.

The success of the *grogneurs* stems from their ability to address important issues of public life in an informed, persuasive, and technically skilful manner, as well as their capacity to convey relevant and reliable information. As experienced information brokers, they are in high demand, particularly among those who are unable or unwilling to use such media to make their issues publicly known. Consequently, the *grogneurs* have gained considerable respect and now occupy a robust position within Bénin's media system.

This position has grown stronger as the *grogneurs* have learned from previous mistakes, adapted their strategies to address legal challenges, and responded effectively to pressure from the media and the authorities. They have further solidified their influence by addressing less credible participants from their ranks and establishing productive interactions with hosts of interactive radio shows. Although they still mainly use radio shows as a medium, their role can certainly be compared to that of influencers in other contexts, who are fewer in number and less prominent in Bénin.

Finally, the communication strategies used by the *grogneurs* contribute to the increasing decentralisation of information flows. *Grogneurs* capitalise on their ability to identify important issues in their social environment, their rhetorical creativity, and their determination to communicate despite all adversities.

Future research can go beyond interactive radio broadcasts to more intensively analyse the speed of information flow across all media and public spheres, its impact on political communication, and the spread of disinformation within changing media ecologies.

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