

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 Hontonou, 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. Hontonou 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 Hontonou 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, demote, 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 Kpondehou, 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 Hontonnou) 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