

## Chapter VI: Intermediations

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### 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 environments<sup>1</sup>.

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

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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; Mutsvauro 2016b; Salawu 2013; Thorsen/Allan 2014; Wall 2019), 'alternative journalism' (Akinfemisoye 2014)<sup>2</sup>, (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.

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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.