

Peer-Reviewed Original Article

## **Interactive Radio Shows and the Role of New Information Brokers in the Republic of Benin**

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**Abstract:** This study investigates interactive forms of public communication in the Republic of Benin (West Africa) with a specific focus on the emergence of new media actors. Benin's media landscape features a variety of media formats, which are constantly incorporating interactive elements. These developments result in novel roles for both media producers and audiences. This analysis examines communication processes in radio call-in shows on social issues in the Republic of Benin that utilize participatory media formats. The primary figures of interest in these shows are frequent callers who participate in grievance-oriented programmes. Known as '*grogneurs*', these individuals have now established themselves as respected information brokers within the country. What factors contribute to their prominence, and what are the implications of their success for information practices in the region? This study is using ethnographic methods and examines the motives, skills, and strategies that underpin *grogneurs*' information acquisition, networking, and legal protection. It also examines *grogneurs*' relationships with journalists, authorities, and broader radio audiences. The article argues that, despite potential role overlap between journalists and *grogneurs*, both groups endeavour to maintain clear distinctions in their roles to safeguard their reputation and foster interactive media formats.

**Keywords:** radio, West Africa, Benin, frequent callers, call-in shows, information brokerage

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## Introduction

This essay has two primary intentions: first, to underline an actor-oriented perspective on evolving media practices in Sub-Saharan Africa, and second, to challenge the widely used term “citizen journalists” when referring to non-professional media actors. It is based on a case study of a participatory radio genre and its central protagonists - frequent callers - in the Republic of Benin. Regarding the first intention, my focus on the key actors driving and shaping the current transformation of the media landscape in West Africa is based on the observation that most studies on this field have tended to focus on the formative processes influencing media and public spheres in the subcontinent. The main concepts in such studies include mediatisation, digitalisation and hybridisation, often coupled with an underlying assumption of technological determinism. These concepts are often drawn from dominant media and communication studies, and are typically used to examine to how and to what extent they apply to Africa. While I do not dispute the relevance of these concepts or engage in the debate about their purported ‘Western’ origins, I contend that an actor-centred perspective must be more thoroughly applied.

There is a notable body of research on journalists in Africa. Recent studies include those by Mawindi Mabweazara and Mare (2021), Frère (2022), and Wahutu (2024). Conversely, studies focusing on other (non-professional) relevant media actors shaping public communication and media content are relatively scarce, with notable exceptions, mainly from political and media anthropology (for example, Brisset-Foucault, 2019; Burrell, 2012; Pype, 2017). Among these non-professional actors are frequent callers to radio stations, commonly referred to as *grogneurs* in the Republic of Benin. These individuals have become integral to the media landscape and dominate various interactive radio shows (Assogba, 2012, 2015a). What is the reason for their success in this context? How can we describe their contributions and communication strategies?

In this respect, the second intention of this article is to question the inadequate conceptualisations of these constantly active, frequent media users. Terms such as “small” or “grassroots” journalists, “media-producing citizens,” or “popular intellectuals” fail to capture their distinctive role within the broader realm of public communication. Drawing on an ethnographic case study of interactive radio shows in Benin, I challenge such representations, as they obscure the distinctive strategies of the central actors involved - journalists and frequent callers alike. Instead, I propose the notion of information broker to describe dedicated, persistent media actors, particularly in the context of call-in radio programmes. I will underline the relevance of this notion in through three key arguments:

- a) their role in everyday communication and knowledge exchange spanning public and social media as well as other of communication spheres;
- b) their strategies for processing and disseminating information; and
- c) their distinctive performances on air.

The article is divided into seven sections. After the introduction, the first section outlines the main methods and data used, followed by the second chapter providing a brief overview of the current media system in the Republic of Benin, highlighting the role of independent radio stations and journalists in the country. The third section describes the interactive radio shows based on call-ins and online contributions from participants, focusing on their structure, key actors, and their place within the Beninese broadcasting landscape. The fourth and fifth sections primarily focus on the most prevalent callers, the *grogneurs*. These sections examine their backgrounds, motives, strategies, and self-positioning. Additionally, the sections discuss the applicability of the previously mentioned concept of information brokers. The sixth section analyses the ambivalent relationships between the *grogneurs* and media authorities, journalists and other audiences. The seventh section considers the implications for modes of information dissemination and the changing public spheres in Benin. This section summarises the key arguments against the backdrop of shifting everyday media use, characterised by the decentralisation of information hubs, aided (but not determined) by the availability of new and hybrid media technologies.

### **Methodological Aspects**

My research on interactive media productions in Benin, especially on *grogne* shows, is based on extensive in-depth ethnographic research. The approach is mainly qualitative, comprising numerous formal (semi-structured and narrative) informal interviews, group discussions with callers and journalists, non-participant and participant observations, and an analysis of audio files (rhetorics and topics) as well as personal documents (i.e., five journals of individual *grogneurs*). Spanning nearly a decade, the research commenced in 2014 and included 12 fieldwork periods, each lasting between two weeks and three months. The study was conducted in three key locations: the larger southern metropolitan areas of Cotonou-Porto-Novo; the region around the northwestern administrative centre of Natitingou; and the third-largest town and trading hub of Parakou (northeast of the country). Furthermore, I recorded and analysed radio shows via the internet live streams and participated in discussions on WhatsApp forums administered by frequent callers, active listeners, and media professionals. In total, I interviewed 55 *grogneurs* across these regions, most of whom were male. Approximately one-third were interviewed several times (ranging from two to eight interviews) to track their itineraries and observe how their strategies evolved within the context of their social lives. I have traced 18 cases or critical statements made by callers on air back to their contexts and origins, which involved visiting the respective locations (e.g., areas with defunct infrastructures, for example), speaking with affected people (regarding unpaid salaries, blocked administrative procedures, or land disputes etc.), and gathering supplementary information both online and offline (e.g., electoral laws, urbanisation plans). My research also involved collaborating with a number of radio stations, including Radio CAPP FM, Fraternité FM, Radio Nanto FM and others. I actively participated in several

*grogne* shows, either as a studio co-host or by assisting *grogneurs* at their locations during their calls. These experiences were complemented by discussing my findings with a number of stakeholders in the field of media and communication, including journalists, other media professionals, scholars, media authorities, and members of civil society organisations. A significant portion of the research involved engaging in discussions with a diverse array of individuals. A total of 62 listeners from various backgrounds were consulted across the research areas. Finally, working closely with listeners' clubs in Natitingou, Parakou, and Cotonou irrefutably demonstrated the pivotal role of interactive radio programmes in not only shaping the country's public sphere(s) but also in addressing individual concerns.

### **Radio, Participatory Media and Changing Public Spheres in the Republic of Benin**

In the Republic of Benin, terrestrial (FM) radio is the most important electronic mass medium in terms of the number of listeners and radio stations. This corresponds to the situation in many other sub-Saharan African countries (Fardon & Furniss, 2000; Gunner et al., 2011; Tudesq, 2002). Following political reforms in the 1990s and a transition towards a more democratic and liberal political system, the introduction of new media laws in 1997 also allowed the establishment of independent radio and television stations (Carlos & Djogbénou, 2005). Since then, there have been four waves of radio stations licensing by the *Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication* (HAAC). At present, the country boasts a wide variety of radio stations, including private, religious, associative and community stations. They operate not only in and around major urban centres such as Cotonou or Parakou, but also in more remote rural areas. FM broadcasting in various national languages has increased the relevance of their productions and their acceptance by local audiences (Grätz, 2000, 2003, 2014b). Despite often poor working conditions caused by economic constraints, increasing state control (as discussed below), and incomplete equipment, most broadcasters manage to offer varied programming that includes information, entertainment, advice, and news. Interactive programmes, facilitated by the mobile phone boom, are particularly popular among listeners. These include press reviews in local languages, music and quiz shows, as well as call-in programmes and political debates. The range of media productions in Benin is generally growing, including a vibrant video industry, WebTV channels, and a growing number of small and large commercial media production companies.

Interactive broadcasts dominate most radio stations and can be seen as participatory media in the sense that they offer much space for listeners to contribute.<sup>1</sup> In this process, radio journalists, callers, technicians, but also the larger audience of listeners – as well as media authorities – are all involved at various levels, albeit and

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<sup>1</sup> Carpentier (2011) distinguishes several levels of audience media participation, ranging from user-generated content to the co-management of media institutions, involving diverse instances of power. He further differentiates modes of media access, interaction and participation (2015).

with differing degrees of power and influence. In my understanding, participatory media are based on interactive communication technologies that enable direct or indirect exchanges and moments of co-production among diverse media users, including professional and non-professional ones (see Carpentier, 2011). These may include more “traditional” mass media; such as radio shows (Mwesige, 2004), as well as digital, mobile and internet-based media (Harlow, 2020; Karaganis, 2007). Whether such technologies genuinely enable increased political participation (Wimmer et al., 2018) remains an open, empirical question.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, technologies such as mobile phones (de Bruijn et al., 2009), terrestrial and internet broadcasting, and the increasing hybridity of media technologies – also evident in Benin – play a significant role in this co-production. These advancements facilitate the appropriation of participatory media by various audiences.

Furthermore, the frequent callers or *grogneurs* serve as central actors in these shows, and can be seen as opinion leaders due to their prominent roles in these shows, which encompass several spheres of public communication. Here I adopt a functional-structural concept of the public sphere (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990), which posits sub-spheres of varying scope and modes of exchange. These include the spheres of face-to-face encounters, public events, and mass-mediated communication. While these spheres are intertwined, each operates with its own distinct logic regarding possible forms of communication (Merten, 1999; Neidhardt, 1994). In the context of contemporary West Africa, the original model proposed by Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990) requires obviously expansion to account for the emergences of spheres generated through internet-based communication, as well as those evolving within social media and digital-mobile communication platforms (Gustafsson et al., 2019; see also Godulla, 2017; Taddicken & Schmidt, 2022). The newer forms represent informal-virtual modes of communication that have become increasingly important in Benin, particularly in urban areas, over the last decade (Assogba & Koulete, 2022). Furthermore, the importance of those spheres that refer to semi-public places – such as pubs, markets, small gatherings – where relevant information (and also rumours) is exchanged, is still very significant. This includes what Ellis (1989) and Nkanga (1992) describe as the phenomenon of *radio trottoir*.<sup>3</sup> I argue that frequent callers, such as the *grogneurs* in Benin, act as key connectors, weaving together these diverse spheres of communication to shape urban discourse.

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<sup>2</sup> Over the past decade, research on participatory media in sub-Saharan Africa has focused heavily on digital and mobile media, enabling the use of social media, weblogs or video platforms. This has highlighted the potential for political participation and empowerment of particular groups within a given society (Mutsvairo, 2016), as well as their educational versus misinformation effects. Less attention has been paid to more ‘classical’ media, with the exception of studies on audience participation in radio talk shows (Mwesige, 2004, 2009) and our topic, call-in shows (Brisset-Foucalt, 2019; Selormey, 2012; Srinivasan & Lopes, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Another example of a very specific urban public sphere in Africa, characterized by informal events, are the so-called street parliaments (Banégas et al., 2012), where open and loosely organized debates take place near markets, universities or newsstands.



## The Relevance of Interactive Radio Shows on Public Issues

Interactive radio shows dominate the broadcast schedules of almost all radio stations in the country. These programmes include greet- and request shows, advice programs, quiz shows, but also live debates on given topics, such as issues in partnerships or family life (Grätz, 2014a). Furthermore, along with the daily programs of most broadcasters, people may phone in just to express their opinions and feelings, greet others, or ask questions. Fridays and Saturday nights are the most prominent times to phone in during music shows to gush the ambiance and make oneself noticeable to friends and fellows. These interactive broadcast shows create spaces for a particular mediated sociability (Srinivasan & Lopes, 2020), or, as Beck (2000) coined it, a technogenetic closeness between hosts and audiences. One type of interactive shows that revolve around current issues of daily life is particularly intriguing and is commonly referred to as *grogne*. Radio listeners in Benin associate this term, which means “expressing anger”, with a call-in programme that allows listeners to freely discuss almost any current life issue. This genre of radio programming draws inspiration from a Europe model, most notably the ongoing and widely appreciated programme *appels sur l'actualité* aired by Radio France International. Similar formats are also successful in other African countries, as evidenced by reports from Ghana (Tettey, 2011), Kenya (Odhiambo, 2011), South Africa (Bosch, 2011), Uganda (Brisset-Foucault, 2009), and other countries. In Benin, the term *grogne* derives from the very first show of its kind, *grogne matinal* (“morning anger”), launched by Golfe FM in the mid-1990s. While the introduction of the first *grogne* shows marked a critical moment in Benin’s media landscape, their broader impact was not immediately evident. The genre really started to boom around the year 2000, when mobile phones became less expensive and thus affordable for more people in Benin. Callers to these programmes address a wide range of issues, including current problems in public and political life, negative experiences with institutions or authorities, or frustrations when using private or public services, but they may also voice critical feedback about the radio program itself.

This program is a participatory media format in constant evolution, has a great standing and enjoys large audience ratings. It has become proliferated and has been adopted by numerous radio stations throughout the country. Mostly between 6.00 and 9.00 a.m., callers who succeed in getting through may voice critical statements addressing daily challenges. Many interventions focus on local issues, especially problems with neighbourhood infrastructures, where callers urge local authorities to better oversee and complete projects (Zakari, 2019). Callers may, however, also talk about broader societal scandals, such as bribery in public offices. All callers are required to give their full name and place of residence. To ensure broad participation, every caller usually has about 90 seconds at their disposal, yet some use this time to mention multiple issues. Hosts often stress the importance avoiding defamation, false accusations, or the explicit naming of individuals. While the journalist usually asks for the caller’s name (some use nick names) and location to enhance

the credibility of the show, this information is not independently verified by the journalist.<sup>4</sup>

The topics raised on these shows primarily concern malfunctioning infrastructure, such as poorly maintained roads, broken traffic lights, or inadequately equipped public schools. Other frequent issues include the lack of energy or water supply, but also the disorganization of public services, such as delays in delivering passports, driving licenses, or other official documents. *Grogneurs* may also address current societal problems, such as accidents, environmental pollution or misconduct by police officers. They relate to current politics, such as easing tensions during election periods, questioning political decisions, or addressing the banning of politicians. Sometimes journalists propose specific topics for discussion or invite studio guests, allowing callers to address their questions to these guests directly.

The reason why these *grogne* shows still have a special, unique place in Benin is undoubtedly linked to changes in the public sphere, but it is primarily rooted in the role of the frequent callers who participate in these shows. My research reveals that about 80% of the callers to the *grogne* shows and political debates are always the same individuals, especially in urban areas. These are the so-called “*grogneurs*”<sup>5</sup>, a term well-known in Benin used to designate those who call in repeatedly over an extended period. These frequent callers are more likely than others to succeed in getting through on the phone line. However, their main objective is to be on air as often as possible, disseminating their messages and actively engaging in public discourse. The attitudes and motivations of these *grogneurs* are explained in greater detail in the following section.

### ***Grogneurs*: Motives, Strategies and Networks**

Most *grogneurs* capitalise on their ability to discuss current affairs in depth, either in French or in one of the national languages, and refine their rhetorical skills, for example, by adding allusions, proverbs and aphorisms, but also typical ways of addressing authorities by name and position. Some *grogneurs* are more like performers or story tellers, using nicknames and elocution to define their personalities. Most of them start their interventions very politely, but turn to a loud and determined style when it comes to pointing out unpleasant matters. They carefully prepare their statements, often writing them down in advance. This is both a useful personal record and a way to maximise the impact of their limited time on air. *Grogneurs* often use their mobile phones to make audio recordings of their interventions, which they

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<sup>4</sup> In any case, contrary to Assogba's (2015a) assumption, the indication of a caller's actual position (which might be untrue) would only rarely be an indication of a journalistic speech register. It is mainly added at the request of the journalist and is part of the usual dramaturgy of the show. Some *grogneurs* would, however, use that indication as a marker of their identity, where others would give just a precise location in order to be more easily found by other listeners (as their informants).

<sup>5</sup> Other common names are “*faiseurs d'opinion*” (opinion makers) or “*lanceurs d'alerte*” (whistle blowers). For the context of this article, I prefer the most widely used term, “*grogneurs*”.

might share with friends and fellow *grogneurs*. They often develop a personal “style” of speaking on air, for example, using typical greetings, inserting proverbs, rhetorical formulas, etc. In a certain perspective, *grogne* shows represent a kind of (radio aired) drama, in so far as these follow similar “scripts” and showcase typical performances. Here, *grogneurs*’ exclamatory styles serve as means of distinction.

These frequent callers are made up of a wide range of people, including employees, craftsmen, entrepreneurs, but also pensioners. *Grogneurs* may earn their living for instance, as teachers, tailors, drivers, mechanics, IT-specialists, clerks, traders as well as shop owners. The proportion of those working on their own account is somewhat higher, whereas the number of those currently employed in government offices is limited. This fact is certainly due to a lower willingness to be exposed to the public if they are also active in the public sector, and probably also to a fear of being blamed by superiors. In this regard, self-employed traders and craftsmen, as well as retired senior citizens feel freer to speak out.

Yet, there is a striking gender imbalance, with only about 5% callers being women. This fact could be explained both by the general male predominance in public debates in the country, but also a culture of female restraint combined with an avoidance to become publicly exposed. Women would call, however, more often to shows in national languages, feeling here more at ease with colloquial expressions. Some stations offer special phone lines exclusively for women to enable a broader participation.

However, the motives for *grogneurs* to call in frequently can be quite diverse. Some feel compelled to contribute to public debates because of their knowledge and expertise on various issues, such as road construction, etc. Many others see themselves as observers of facts in their immediate environment, issues which are not covered by journalists and which also escape the attention of the authorities.

With my interventions during the *grogne* shows, I hope to fill some gaps, those of the radio news, which underreport our current problems. After heavy rains, the city turns into a small swamp, for example. All the craftsmen, traders and businessmen have to cope with these miserable conditions. Whenever I see the many big holes in the middle of the main roads, I must say something. (S. Gnonhossou, personal communication, October 11, 2021)

The majority of *grogneurs* share an attitude of openness and the need to better the nation.

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 is us, we have to put it right. (J. Avocan, personal communication, October 13, 2021)

This attitude is often combined with a strong self-confidence and a desire for recognition. They do, however, differ in terms of the issues they are most passionate about and in terms of their listening habits and interactions with particular radio stations.



Most *grogneurs* could be described as alert, open-minded, and observant people who critically examine the public life around them. Some of them make use of specialised knowledge, which may stem from their education (e.g., law studies), their professional background (as traders, civil engineers, etc.), their roles in NGOs, associations or offices, or connections with people in such positions. Building relationships with a wide network of potential “informants” is essential for all *grogneurs*, as their insights usually come from unofficial, unpublished sources rather than traditional media. *Grogneurs* gather information through various means, including by telephone (often via WhatsApp or other messaging platforms, as telephone numbers are not particularly private in Benin) or through personal contacts at home or work, as is common for tailors, shopkeepers, mechanics, or welders).

Direct contacts are the main source of information for *grogneurs*. Different people can use this opportunity to pass on verbal information or written documents to highlight problematic issues. These individuals are not merely whistle-blowers. They may be employees in conflict with their employers over unpaid wages, merchants frustrated by unfulfilled contracts, parents suspecting school authorities of misconduct related to exams or scholarship applications, or citizens facing delays and inefficiencies in administrative processes (e.g., car registrations or passports).

In addition, some *grogneurs* deliberately visit the gathering points for taxi drivers (*zémidjan* or *kèkènon*), hubs for exchanging all kinds of information, including rumours. However, there are many more ways of circulating information, as well as a multiplicity of places and methods through which information can be passed and exchanged in urban contexts. A *grogneur*, for instance, might receive a visit from an intermediary who has received information via a friend’s WhatsApp message, or receive a tipoff while buying fuel in their neighbourhood, attending a funeral or talking to a relative who just returned from a local association meeting. Conversely, almost all *grogneurs* actively verify the information they receive through various means – asking other affected individuals, making phone calls, making enquiries on the spot, looking for documents, or confronting those implicated with allegations. Apart from simply expressing their opinions, they must be careful not to give false or incomplete information in order to avoid false accusations. To do otherwise would expose them to severe criticism, loss of reputation and even libel suits. According to my research, in today’s climate of increasing governmental pressure, this requirement for their on-air interventions is taken very seriously, perhaps more so than ever before. Conversely, this helps to make them less vulnerable to accusations than in previous times. The demand for evidence is now also invoked by the hosts of *grogne* shows whenever necessary.

Social media such as Facebook, but also messenger services such as WhatsApp, have become important tools for most *grogneurs*, mainly to check information or necessary verifications for their statements and to exchange information among fellow *grogneurs*, including recording their interventions on air (Assogba & Koulete, 2022). Unlike about 10 years ago, information circulating on these networks would

not simply be used for radio calls without further verification. Most *grogneurs* would avoid participating in rumour mills or fake news campaigns. On the contrary, on various occasions, several *grogneurs* raised arguments against fake news or facts.<sup>6</sup> They follow a variety of discussion threads or forums on social media but prefer calling into radio stations to maintain their reputation for trustworthiness and seriousness. By doing so, they have added the use of social media to their repertoire of tools without allowing it to undermine their position or diminish the importance of the *grogne* shows in which they prefer to intervene.<sup>7</sup>

Conversely, most *grogneurs* are also very involved in public affairs outside their radio broadcasts. Their visibility enhances their reputation among listeners, friends and neighbours. Most *grogneurs* know each other - at least virtually, but also personally – through occasional meetings. They may visit each other at workshops, or meet in bars or public places to exchange information, especially on matters of self-protection against unjustified accusations. Some committed *grogneurs* have formed associations. In Parakou, the *Association des faiseurs d'opinion de Parakou* (AFOP; Zakari, 2019) brings together frequent callers from the region to strengthen their networks and provide legal advice. In the greater metropolitan area around Cotonou, many *grogneurs* are active in civic associations, such as consumer rights associations (*Fédération Nationale des Associations des Consommateurs du Bénin*), NGOs, interest groups for disabled people or craftsmen's associations, or in listeners' clubs. The latter are also organised around small radio stations throughout the country, with the help of social media. *Grogneurs* are often quite active in those listeners' clubs (where members would regularly call in to a variety of programmes), such as those of Golfe FM, Nanto FM or (formerly) to Soleil FM.

In Benin, a very small number of *grogneurs* would use their media activities as a launching pad for a political career,<sup>8</sup> or even be on the payroll of a political party. To do so would mean changing sides and losing any kind of independent stance. A few *grogneurs* may misuse their skills, such as putting pressure on individuals for financial gain, or orchestrating radio calls to challenge regulations. However, these people are a clear minority. Frequent callers may be more likely to derive some hedonistic pleasure from being heard by others on air, and from acquiring local celebrity. Other *grogneurs* share a vocation to “enlighten others” or to “reveal the truth”, which sometimes turns into a mania. Most *grogneurs*, however, see themselves as indispensable mediators and conveyers of information to a large audience.

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<sup>6</sup> *Grogneurs* in Cotonou were, for instance, addressing false information about armed robberies at the Missèbo market in 2020, offering important information about a tragic bus accident in Savè in 2023 or in Parakou with regard to the causes of a great fire in the Zongo market in 2023.

<sup>7</sup> Currently, radio stations in Bénin do not run *grogne* shows with audio files submitted by listeners via social media or messenger services such as WhatsApp, mainly for technical reasons (Assogba & Koulete, 2022). Some of them organise additional forums on Facebook or via WhatsApp groups where listeners can take part in debates and have their statements read out (e.g., the morning show *nasuba* on Radio Parakou; *questions du jour* produced by Radio Fraternité, Parakou) or invite listeners to send short messages (e.g., 90mins pour convaincre, Sundays, Radio Benin).

<sup>8</sup> Such efforts were reported most notably by Brisset-Foucault (2018) for Uganda, where ‘serial callers’ used their position and popularity to launch political careers.

*Grogneurs* are therefore not professional callers; rather, their activities extend beyond any metaphorical uses of the term. In the proper sense, it does not apply to most frequent callers in Benin, as they typically hold full-time, bread-winning jobs which they occupy all day long. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of their calls are not motivated by the interests of third parties.

### ***Grogneurs* as Information Brokers**

At this point, I would like to come back to my initial aim of conceptualising the role of *grogneurs*. Here, I have to situate my research within the current theoretical debate on media in Africa in general and communication practices in particular. In general, it has been widely acknowledged that the emergence of new media, together with the general global media flux and, above all, the increasing availability of new media technologies, has significantly transformed communication practices for both media users and professionals. With the growing importance of digital media, mobile phones and social media, new options for active participation by media users, including the production of relevant content and information, have also emerged in Africa (Mudhai et al., 2009). These developments have opened pathways for unofficial, non-professional actors to contribute to media-related public spheres, either by posting on social media, news blogs or WhatsApp forums, or by running self-published websites, YouTube channels, or newsletters. Some committed media users constantly provide relevant information on social or political issues, serving as a critical resource, especially during times of crisis or censorship of official media.

These (non-professional) media producers, especially those who constantly feed in relevant information, have often been labelled ‘grassroots’ or ‘citizen journalists’ (Banda, 2010; de Bruijn, 2016; Mutsvairo, 2016). On the one hand, such a label certainly has the advantage of valorising their work and discussing their activities within the larger framework of changing media systems characterised by digitisation and media transformation (Jenkins, 2006). On the other hand, it has the tendency to blur the core of their activities and not to do justice to their particular role within civil society in its own right, which is in many ways very different from that of journalists. I would argue that *grogneurs*, as permanent and dynamic media actors, cannot be described as journalists in either a narrow or a broad sense. In Benin, most of them do not want to be considered or confused with journalists.

My argument is based on other characteristics: their motives, self-understanding and modes of action, their role and position within the larger public sphere in Benin and, finally, practices of obtaining and transmitting information. Firstly, both *grogneurs* and “official” journalists are keen to maintain their position.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, they are eager to uphold strict boundaries to define their roles; almost none of the *grogneurs* would define themselves as aspiring journalists, and no

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<sup>9</sup> In the media law (*code de la presse*) in its renewed version from 2015, *grogneurs* figure, however, as “assimilated and auxiliary to journalists”, together with other aidants such as stringers, etc.

journalist would consider a *grogneur* an equal partner or peer. Journalists as hosts of *grogne* shows simply have more power. They would censor callers to interactive shows directly or indirectly (see also Pype, 2011 for interactive TV shows in DR Congo). Journalists and *grogneurs*, as well as politicians, are keen to preserve the strategic advantages associated with their respective positions, for example, *grogneurs* point to shared responsibilities rather than being exposed completely alone, and journalists are keen to preserve a professional stance and to avoid any risks. Conversely, *grogneurs* would not like to be confused with any kind of journalists. A typical, self-assured statement from Adam Bachirou, a well-known *grogneur* in the town of Parakou in northern Benin:

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 first-hand 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. (A. Bachirou, personal communication, August 24, 2023)

*Grogneurs* are much closer to local events and issues than journalists, mainly because the latter have limited numbers, time and resources to investigate current facts and figures. Journalists can benefit from a network of informants, friends and colleagues, but they want to get information before *grogneurs* reveal it in a call-in show. They prefer to be prepared to judge beforehand whether these are inappropriate topics. Ideally, they would begin to investigate such issues by reporting on a problem in one of the regular newspapers or news programmes. Conversely, they have to maintain a certain level of professionalism and do everything they can to avoid any allegations of libel. Of course, they will do anything to ensure their income. *Grogneurs* certainly have more room to manoeuvre because, in most cases, they have less to lose.

Journalists (including the hosts of *grogne* shows) and *grogneurs* definitely need each other. *Grogne* shows are a way of spicing up radio programmes and helping to maintain a stable audience. Conversely, *grogneurs* need a wide range of programmes to establish their presence and to become well-known to a wide audience. Furthermore, there are a variety of reciprocal relationships between the two sides. *Grogneurs* are often sought out by journalists for interviews to offer background information or to provide access to local informants in their role as typical information brokers. Radio journalists often invite them as guests to enrich studio debates.

However, when it comes to their particular position within the circles of communication – both informal and formal – the divergent roles of *grogneurs* as mediators or brokers becomes most evident. They often act on behalf of others, either directly entrusted with or feeling compelled to transmit specific messages or concerns over the airwaves. Nonetheless, these statements must be based on reliable and verifiable grounds.

People know me. If I am a bit far away from here, people call me to tell me what is going on. Many also come to see me here in the workshop to talk about what they're struggling with. It is important to verify all such information. To give an example: the other day I received information about a problem at the overland bus station on the outskirts of the city. First, I called the other party to get one side of the information, and then I went there to get the other version. And then I made my intervention on air. Today I received a complaint about the state of a public project of road construction, look here, there is a dossier as a pdf about the project I retrieved from a friend at the municipality, with all the details. This will allow me to better prepare my *grogne* call, after evaluating the state of affairs. (A. Bachirou, personal communication, October 18, 2021)

*Grogneurs* are often actively sought out by other media users because of their unique skills, their boldness and well-honed strategies – such as successfully navigating the challenge of getting through a telephone line to call in. They are valued for their ability to address any issue directly yet politely, a trait that often sets them apart from journalists, as well as their reputation for honesty and reliability. *Grogneurs* are assigned these tasks – a form of indirect media participation – because many people would consider themselves too shy or not talkative enough to speak for themselves on air, and in most cases, they simply do not want to expose themselves. Either they fear direct consequences within their institutions or companies, or they do not want to be held accountable for disclosing confidential information. Others just want to avoid any formal yet demanding legal procedures.

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

Some fellow listeners simply do not have the time to wait patiently on the phone to get through. This is where the *grogneurs* assume an important role - not merely as representatives, delegates or “spokespersons” for others, but also as social witnesses. They speak about issues that they know very well, addressing both individual and widespread problems that resonate with the experience of many others. In many cases, the *grogneurs* take on these tasks themselves. One example is Nicaise Atchadé, an agricultural entrepreneur.

I was once told that an elderly market woman in the big Dantokpa market in Cotonou was in trouble. Someone was claiming the same stall. 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. (N. Atchadé, personal communication, November 1, 2022)

In another case, Nicaise felt obliged to talk about some 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 board to intervene - in vain. Despite making the issue public, the inhabitants of the area did not receive any compensation, which, according to Nicaise, demonstrates their vulnerability.

*Grogneurs* are definitely not mediators (and not advocates) in the legal sense, as they cannot act on a strictly impartial or protocol basis. They do, however, try to adapt the issues of their reference persons to their interventions on air, according to the legal limits and the intricacies of *grogne* shows. In a way, *grogneurs* can also take on the task of speaking on behalf of themselves and their fellows facing similar problems.

For example, the aforementioned well-known *grogneur* Sébastien Gnonhossou, a tailor in Cotonou, constantly drew attention to the unpaid COVID allowances to which he himself was entitled, but also criticised the deplorable state of the infrastructures, such as the abandoned roads, on which they all depend on a daily basis (several interviews in Cotonou, 2021-2023). *Grogneurs* would address their issues in a very polite manner, although this does not exclude the possibility of a more abrupt tone to express anger, for instance, when drinking water is still missing for long periods. Many of them approach the authorities with a more moral attitude.

Anicet Michel, for instance, reminds all the country's mayors to improve their actions, because "they should know that they are there for the people" (Akakpo, 2021). In his statement, he criticises the slow and reluctant distribution of fertiliser to farmers who need it, even though they are supposed to help distribute it. Listeners could also detect a hint of corruption here, as in the past such channels were open to personal gain.

In the Republic of Benin, committed *grogneurs* share a number of characteristics. These include a strong interest in public affairs and up-to-the-minute information, a certain penchant for public intervention and a desire for recognition, an eagerness and even a passion for calling and listening to radio stations, and a commitment to maintaining a certain status within their personal networks of informants, friends and relatives; networks from which they may benefit extensively. They are, certainly, concerned citizens, and as active members of civil society, interested in public issues. They should not be trivialised as either "citizen journalists" or "political careerists in the making." Instead, they are best described as independent communication brokers. In their pivotal role, they thus constantly mediate between various spheres of the public discourse: the informal public sphere(s) of personal encounters (including street gossip and the aforementioned *radio trottoir*), the digital mass-

mediated sphere(s) of social media and mobile platforms (especially WhatsApp forums), and the classical mass media, primarily FM radio. *Grogneurs* have also become influential in agenda-setting processes, relentlessly pointing out deficiencies in public infrastructure – such as the state of central roads, bridges and water supplies – pertinent instances of power abuse by public officials, including embezzlement and illicit real estate sales,<sup>10</sup> and broader social injustices.<sup>11</sup> Finally, *grogneurs* are more than just concerned citizens, as they develop and maintain sophisticated public communication strategies. Additionally, they transcend the role of mere representatives of others by acting as intermediaries between media producers, authorities and the wider public.

### **Media Authorities, *Grogneurs* and the General Public**

From the outset, media authorities, particularly the High Media Authority (HAAC), kept a watchful eye on the *grogne* shows. The openly critical stance of most callers and their candid discussion of public policy and governance were new, sparking suspicions that some calls were commissioned to damage opposing politicians. The HAAC, alongside the *Observatoire de la Déontologie et de l'Ethique dans les Médias* (ODEM), urged radio stations and journalists to better guarantee the basic standards of broadcasting, to avoid any kind of unjustified accusations, verbal attacks and other forms of abuse. Attempts to stop such broadcasts were unsuccessful, but instances of abuse were often addressed and punished. Pressure on radio stations to conform to government communication directives began to intensify under President Boni Yayi (2006–2016; Grätz, 2015) and has escalated significantly since President Patrice Talon assumed office in 2016. Under Talon's administration, coercive laws have been introduced, and individual media practitioners have faced various forms of censorship and severe legal punishments. Journalists and web activists alike were sentenced to prison; radio stations and newspapers banned. Especially the law on digital media (*code numérique*) allows severe punishments for minor offences. In accordance with Frère (2015), the Beninese media system, similar to other francophone African countries, could thus be characterised as 'pluralist authoritarian', tolerating limited spaces of media participation within strict boundaries of censorship.

As a result, several radio stations, especially those under the direct control of or contracted by the government (Assogba, 2015b; Grätz, 2015), have opted for pre-recorded programmes, which allow for better filtering of unwanted statements. Journalists who still host *grogne*-style live radio shows are careful to avoid any direct

<sup>10</sup> For many years, the issue of public and private property, "*affaires domaniales*", for example, the unauthorised sale of public real estate or the acceptance of illegal occupations by local authorities, was at the centre of *grogneurs*' complaints. This finally led – among other things – to the creation of a specialised court in April 2023 and to the conviction of former municipal authorities, for example, in Abomey-Calavi.

<sup>11</sup> In this respect, *grogneurs* were critical towards the social consequences of repeated waves of expulsion of informal dwellers (*déguerpissements*) after 2016, especially in municipal areas.

attacks on leading politicians or the president. This does not mean that the government or local authorities ignore these programmes. They often monitor them to obtain sensitive information on current affairs, allowing them to be prepared and to circumvent potential unrest. In the early 2000s, *grogneurs* still had a mixed reputation in Benin. On the one hand, they were praised for their courage to speaking out, contributing to the growing openness of private media and the articulation of social problems. On the other hand, they were criticised for their perceived sensationalism and overzealousness. Some *grogneurs* were accused to settle private conflicts and to seek financial gains by disseminating unverified information. Today, however, such cases are rare.<sup>12</sup> Most *grogneurs* are highly respected.<sup>13</sup> Political pressure under the Talon administration, combined with internal debates within *grogneurs* networks, has helped to clean up the field and refine their approach. I contend that the growing political pressure has made the *grogneurs* more aware of both their limitations and their role in public communication. The situation has sharpened their judgement of what can be safely aired and has helped them to improve their skills. In other words, the less they have been accused of abuse, the stronger their credibility and position has become, and the more their persistent courage in addressing sensitive public issues<sup>14</sup> has evolved along the lines of what is legally possible.

Finally, *grogneurs* actively embrace their role as intermediaries in public discourse. A notable example is Herman Meton, a well-known *grogneur* who emerged as a spokesman for victims of a large Ponzi scheme scandal (involving *ICC Services*), being himself a victim of that scam. Another illustrative case is the role *grogneurs* played during the COVID-19 pandemic crises. At the end of March 2020, debates about the severity of the pandemic, respective government responses, and appropriate individual behaviour dominated *grogne* shows. On Friday 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020, both morning *grogne* shows and evening debates featured various *grogneurs* warning listeners against believing a widely spread rumour about a stringent lockdown to be decreed the following Monday. Many frequent callers not only urged compliance with official governmental directives,<sup>15</sup> but also asserted their status as influential figures by emphasizing their role in disseminating accurate information. As Rock-Yves Ahouanchede (a *grogneur* who has since died) would later point out:

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<sup>12</sup> This does not exclude gifts, so that *grogneurs* may recharge their prepaid phone accounts, for example.

<sup>13</sup> Fellow listeners appreciate their persistence, courage and dedication. However, opinions are sometimes divided about their often quite obtruding communicative styles. The aspect of wider audience participation cannot be developed further in this essay.

<sup>14</sup> In this respect, *grogneurs* such as Sebastien Gnonhossou or Paul Chodatou constantly demand the liberation of political prisoners, such as opposition politicians Joël Aïvo or Reckya Madougou, both arrested for plotting against the president just prior to the 2021 elections. Furthermore, they constantly remind on the destiny of those settlers being evicted from their (informal) housing due to urban restructuring and forced relocations since 2017.

<sup>15</sup> At the end of March 2020, the Benin government, as many other countries, worldwide, adopted a number of rigid measures to limit the infection rates due to the Covid-19-crisis. Among them were the creation of a disease protection barrier belt (*cordon sanitaire*) around all major Southern Cities, and the implementation of rules to prevent public gatherings.

Since the arrival of that evil thing, there are numerous kinds of false information. Thus, we, the *faiseurs d'opinion* should be associated to all campaigns of information. People know me and my role, therefore, many people ask me about these issues as well, therefore, we should be always updated to exercise our role. (R.-Y. Ahouanchede, personal communication, October 23, 2021)

The measures taken by the government, were, with some critical observations on their implementation, mostly supported by the *grogneurs*. They often positioned themselves as essential figures in the dissemination of important information, emphasizing their role as trustworthy intermediaries. In a similar vein, Mathieu Hontonnou and Sébastien Gnonhossou underlined that people should listen to them [the *grogneurs*, TG] rather than follow fake news (Abibou, 2020). They argued that the information department of the presidency (*cellule de communication*) should involve the *grogneurs*, making them part of the broader sensitization strategies. This view was echoed by callers such as Alain Zoumaton or Brice Sognibé, who made similar points on Friday, 3 April 2020, and Saturday, 4 April 2020, in the *grogne* shows aired by CAPP FM. During this period, not only did the “purer” *grogne* shows feature constant interventions from *grogneurs* discussing current events and necessary actions to contain the pandemic, but also particular call-in shows with a thematic focus were dedicated to this issue, sparking debates among callers, journalists, and studio guests. In fact, in March 2022, the Ministry of Health invited *grogneurs* as “*faiseurs d'opinion*” to a workshop to exchange ideas and strategies for countering the pandemic. This event took place in Cotonou on 3 March, 2022, and was attended by the president of a listeners’ club and well-known *grogneur* El Hadj Ramanou Gbadamassi (Gouvernement du Bénin, 2022; Sosedo News, 2022). This example highlights a process of role-taking, which unfolds along an increasing self-esteem, especially among those *grogneurs* who are constantly on air on a daily level.

### **Summary: Information Brokerage and Changing Public Spheres**

*Grogne* radio shows continue to flourish in Benin’s vibrant media landscape. They benefit from a particular interplay between mass-media, digital platforms, and informal, private communication networks. Their pertinence is not only a product of a growing diversity of audience expressions but also in their role in the co-production, cross-referencing, and amplification of information within changing economies of attention (Franck, 1998; Lanham, 2007). In the past, a great deal has been attributed to the circulation of informal information in urban settings, epitomized by the concept of *radio trottoir* (Ellis, 1989; Nkanga, 1992). Today, unofficial information can circulate much faster and through even more spaces and hybrid media, largely beyond the established mass media. The *grogne* radio show format not only adds another dimension to this ecosystem of communication, but can only be understood in relation to different sites, actors and information sources, shaped by new media technologies and expanding communication spaces. The *grogneurs*, who have considerably refined their activities in recent years in terms of veracity and persuasive power, are indispensable to these networks of communication. Their

success stems from their ability to address important issues of public life in a comprehensive, rhetorical and technically skilful manner, and the capacity to convey relevant and reliable information. As skilled information brokers, they are highly in demand by others, especially by those unable or unwilling to use such media or to expose themselves to make their issues publicly known. *Grogneurs* also play a key role in the transmission of relevant news. Journalists often rely on their insights to build their own content and produce popular radio formats that attract large audiences. As the well-known *grogneur* Roland Gbemanan puts it:

Journalists and directors of radio stations simply need us, because we *grogneurs* help them to produce their daily radio programmes: not only do we intervene in various *grogne* shows, but we also call in extensively on many other interactive programmes, be they quiz shows, greeting and request shows, advice or educational programmes, and of course talk shows with politicians, experts or music stars. They must allow us to make our statements and comments on political issues, whether they like our positions or not. (R. Gbemanan, personal communication, October 12, 2021)

As a result, *grogneurs* have gained considerable respect and now hold a strong position within the Benin's media system. This position has grown stronger the more they have been able to learn from previous mishaps, adapting to legal challenges and responding effectively to pressure from media authorities. Their influence has further solidified through the removal of less credible participants from their ranks and the establishment of productive interactions with the hosts of interactive radio shows. *Grogneurs* capitalise on their ability to identify important issues in their social environment, filtering unreliable information from social media and mobile platforms, using their relationships with fellow *grogneurs*, and, creatively mediating between diverse actors.<sup>16</sup> Although they mainly use one particular media genre – radio – their role could be certainly compared to influencers in other contexts. However, influencers relying on websites or social media platforms are less numerous and prominent in Benin. The communication strategies employed by *grogneurs*, alongside those of other active social media users, contribute to the increasing decentralisation of information flows.

In conclusion, interactive shows and their central protagonists - the *grogneurs* and journalists - have contributed to the creation of appropriate participatory media in Benin. Their activities have led to a growing articulation and interrelation of various public spheres and to a particular convergence of “classical” media such as radio, with “new” media technologies, such as mobile phones. From a functional-structural perspective on public spheres mentioned at the beginning, *grogneurs* play a mediating role, connecting different sub-spheres. They are present almost every day across the airwaves, constantly (inter)mediating between the sphere of everyday encounters or personal, face-to-face relationships and the mass-media public sphere

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<sup>16</sup> This situation differs from other sub-Saharan countries such as Nigeria, Kenya or Ghana, where influencers, vloggers, bloggers, etc. are much more prominent. One factor explaining this difference is the comparatively high cost of good internet access in Benin (€25 for a monthly flat rate with sufficient bitrates).



of radio broadcasts, and also increasingly between these spheres and the virtual-informal sphere of social media.

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