Struggling for New Communicative Spaces: Young Media Producers and Politics in the Republic of Benin

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This contribution focuses on innovative media productions as a mode of political engagement for young people in the Republic of Benin (West Africa). The chapter explores, from a sociological perspective, the potential agency they stand to gain from their daily engagement with communication media, and argues that their popular recognition is linked both to their political credibility and their creativity as well as ability to continually forge close relationships with their audiences. Meanwhile, they are also promoting novel media genres that are triggering debates on pertinent societal issues and convey information. The careers of these young media professionals often entail a parallel process of enhancing their capacities while coping with the daily structural (censorship, low salaries) and technical challenges. The chapter links up to recent studies on youth and political engagement and new media actors in sub-Saharan Africa.

Changing Media and Communication Spaces in the Republic of Benin

At the end of 2014 and the beginning of 2015, many West African states witnessed new waves of public protests against governments in Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. In particular, the events in Burkina Faso, the rebellion that led to the demise of the semi-authoritarian regime of Compaoré,
indicate the limits of facade democracies that normalized practices of corruption, clientelism and social exclusion. Most of these protests were steered by young people (in a wide sense, referring to social juniors, see below) – who constitute the focus of the present volume. Most observers argue that these are young people who are socially excluded, often not formally employed, who are not part of those elites who capitalize on positions in the state administration, traditional or religious institutions or lucrative contracts or businesses. There is much truth in this observation, but it should not lead us to overlook the fact that critical positions vis-à-vis incumbent elites are also held by many young people who may not be completely excluded socially, but who are still struggling to get a voice and create their own realm of manoeuvre within those political systems. This is the case of young media producers in the Republic of Bénin, who share an idea of independent and responsible journalism, and strive to enhance their role within Beninese society day by day. Working either as freelancers, enthusiasts or in formal positions, they represent a new generation of young media producers who are quite different from state-dependent career journalists, and all are struggling with the structural and political problems of their country. A major motivation to contribute to the present volume derives from the fact that in many such political movements on the African continent media play central roles, as tools of mobilization or to enhance new spaces of political debate, extending beyond the often cited social media. Here, young people, as I argue based on my case study, are the main force of innovation and contestation. Whether they should be seen as ‘breakers’ or ‘makers’ (see Honwana and De Boeck 2005), their position in public spaces has constantly grown and persists despite power struggles and economic constraints.

Actually, there are several, often competing concepts of youth in African studies. Most of these purposely relativize ‘hard’ facts such as biological age, biological puberty or maturity, and rather focus on social and / or political factors determining youth as a social status contingent on their particular positioning and perceptions of them by society; perspectives still differ with respect to the main criteria for the category of ‘youth’. Many classical anthropological studies hint at local classifications based on age-stratification, often induced by rites of passage. These tend to be even more complex when assigning age-cohorts and age-groups that continue to structure either male or female populations in later life-stages and may also become politically relevant. A strong reference to local (emic) categories certainly represents those visions that simply distinguish non-married people from those who are married with children. Other, more sociologically minded perspectives focus on people’s social positioning in society with regard, principally, to the factors
of their (limited) economic status, experience and political influence, yet endowed with creativity and capacity to change (see Amit-Talai and Wulff 1995; Boesen 2008; Martin, Ungruhe and Häberlein 2016). This automatically enlarges the category of ‘youth’ to include large cohorts of people who might even be married and starting a professional career. All of these perspectives share, nevertheless, the idea of contextualizing concepts of youth in Africa rather than simply relying on biological or statistical approaches. My own approach largely sympathizes with the more sociological perspective, asserting that, in the field of media in West Africa, the status of youth corresponds to professional ‘juniors’, explicitly addressed by actors themselves, which largely (though not fully) parallels differentials in social power and economic status. In the case of Benin, these differences between status groups (which could be sub-classified and display various modes of transition as well blurring aspects when it comes to individual cases) are further fuelled by historical development with regard to changes in the whole landscape of media especially after 1990, with new entries into the field, new business opportunities and the growing political relevance of media and its effects on public culture (developed in more detail below). My argument is twofold. Younger media professionals in Benin (based on the above mentioned criteria) share a range of features that allow me to discern their particular strengths (ambitions for renewal and breaking new ground, creativity), as well as weaknesses (daily financial as well as political compromises, social indeterminacy), and to situate these in the context of the wider debate on youth in Africa (see the introduction to this volume). Secondly, I aim at underlining the differences with more established media actors such as career journalists employed at state institutions or successful media entrepreneurs, in terms of creativity, but also precariousness of position.

Before analyzing the role of young media producers in the Republic of Benin more thoroughly, I would like to sketch the general situation of media in the country. As a former French colony, Benin gained independence as the Republic of Dahomey in 1960. The country was marked by a period of political instability with several coups d’état from 1960 to 1972, and a longer socialist period between 1972 and 1990, which was characterized by a dictatorial system. In 1990, a national conference opened the way for a more democratic political structure and set the stage for considerable media liberalization, terminating the monopoly of the central state and its broadcasting house ORTB (Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Bénin); this subsequently led to new state-independent newspapers and rural radio stations (Grätz 2003). In 1997, a new media law also enabled the establishment of independent radio and TV stations (Carlos and Djogbénou 2005; Grätz 2009, 2014b). These are generally
The field of journalism and media production – including the vibrant film and video industry, and the increasing number of commercial media production companies – is ever expanding.

Investigating the social history of the media field in Benin, we may distinguish four generations (as conceptualized by Karl Mannheim 1952, see Parnes, Vedder and Willer 2008) of active contributors. The first generation comprises those media pioneers working in press houses established in colonial times, especially as part of the colonial administrative service targeting expatriate audiences. These people often came from typical literate professions, working as teachers, pastors, translators or clerks. Some of them began to publish the first independent journals on political activities during the decolonization period. The second generation is related to the expansion of the state-owned broadcasting and press system in the mid-seventies. This cohort is associated with the establishment of larger TV and radio broadcasting houses in Cotonou and regional services in Parakou (after 1983), as well as the broader nationwide distribution of the governmental press, triggering the need for a greater number of media specialists who were trained at supra-regional educational institutions abroad. This generation includes journalists working as permanent state agents. The socialist period helped to enhance the corpus of journalists by extending media services, but hampered conditions for free and critical journalism against the backdrop of propaganda politics.

The third generation consists of all those journalists and media professionals who emerged immediately after the political changes in 1990 and the increase in press freedom. The press sector in particular experienced a veritable boom; today there are up to 100 journals and newspapers. Members of this third generation often started their careers with one of the early independent journals, including student newspapers. Most journalists from this group, who often possess a high level of formal education, came from other fields outside journalism. They were trained on the job and / or in subsequent intensive training courses.

The fourth and contemporary generation of media professionals capitalizes on a multiplicity of emergent options in the field of media and the

3 The last attribution of frequencies was issued in 2013.
4 A proper curriculum on journalism has been established only recently, at university level and at the private Media College ISMA (Institut Supérieur des Métiers de l’Audiovisuel) in Cotonou. Most active presenters and technicians, often possessing a degree in other subjects, were trained on the job, across various internships with different media, seminars and training courses offered by NGO or private institutions.
public sphere. This generation is, however, also facing growing competition, commercialization and direct political interference by the state (see below). Most of them are very young (chiefly between 18 and 40), working in private start-up media outlets and are active both in using ‘classical’ as well social media, above all Facebook and private blogs, to spread news about, for example, cases of abuse of state power and various public protest movements in Benin as well as in other West African countries.

Working as an emergent media professional in one of the state-independent institutions generally does not pay well. Salaries are low (between 50 and 200 Euro a month) and working conditions are bad, particularly because extra allowance is usually not provided for the production of features and the coverage of events. Consequently, many of these media professionals hold side jobs: either as MCs at private or public events, in the ad business, or as teachers or clerks at municipal offices. Technicians often run workshops at home, or offer technical assistance at private parties or public events. Many young journalists work simultaneously as presenters, journalists, technicians, DJs, editors or PR officers for several media outlets. These struggles nevertheless keep them in close touch with various potential audiences and offer them substantial insight into the daily hustle of various parts of the public that inevitably shapes their methods of producing media content. In addition, per diem payments from one of the numerous workshops or conferences which media professionals are often invited to as ‘social multipliers’, are seductive additional revenues. These are supplemented by money for expenses journalists may receive for covering a particular event, meeting, opening ceremony and so on.5

Individual pathways to media engagement in the media field are quite diverse. They range, for instance, from successful editors and radio presenters with impressive careers to débrouillards (‘those muddling through’) struggling as permanent interns.

Aristide Balaro, 34, finished high school and studied agriculture at the University of Abomey-Calavi. He then entered the media business through an internship at the state broadcaster ORTB and worked with the youth Radio Ado 3S, both in Cotonou. Furthermore, he was employed for a year by the newspaper Le Matinal. Subsequently, he attended a three-month media-training program offered by Ado’s Canadian partner NGO, and specialized in radio production and documentary film. Today, he works simultaneously with Ado 3S, hosting two shows – a quiz show and a business magazine presenting young entrepreneurs – while also lending himself to help the station’s management in training interns. In addition, he works as a freelance documentary

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5 Here entailing private / commercial, community / associative and religious broadcasters.
filmmaker for development agencies, producing, for example, a film about the work of an NGO in the farming sector or the success of artisan job training program. From time to time, he is also invited to host a magazine on ORTB TV, and he offers his editing services to producers of small home-made videos video clips of rising musicians. Finally, he produces leaflets, such as for a new private business school in Cotonou where he, in turn, may enjoy free further education in the IT field. He lives in Godomey, a blossoming trading city on the outskirts of Cotonou, and owns a pub there that he was able to establish thanks to a piece of land he inherited from his late aunt, and where his business flourishes on weekends. (Interviews in Cotonou, March 2013 and March 2014)

In some cases, young media professionals succeed in gaining a formal position at the state broadcaster ORTB where they expected a greater financial security, but are often hampered in their activities.6

Despite a general openness of the media system and its growing plurality, a free and bold development of media and journalism in Benin is still disadvantaged by various constraints that are limiting unhindered activity of journalists in the country. These may comprise legal-institutional and structural-economic aspects, direct and indirect modes of censorship, professional attitudes and self-censorship, and finally the general relevance of media in everyday life in Benin.

On the first level, we have to look at the conditions that enable journalists to establish media outlets. To found a newspaper is rather easy, but radio and TV stations as electronic media are licensed by the HAAC only periodically after a call for applications along with procedures for assessing the documents. This procedure is, however, not always a guarantee of success. In 2008, the HAAC was in fact already licensing various new electronic media, including local radio stations, but the Ministry of Information refused the final signature because of technical reasons. Broadcasting frequencies are, in fact, not available to an unlimited extent, but in this case, the argument was played out at a moment when the president was not in favour of radio stations run by people or groups distant to his regime.

Secondly, once a media outlet is established, its daily survival is difficult to assure. In the case of newspapers and journals, which derive their budget from sales of their publications or from subscribers only to a very limited extent, sponsors, either from political parties or individual politicians or

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6 The young TV journalist Expedit Ologoun, for example, started to present a morning show at ORTB TV, featuring political debates with studio guests. The often critical positions taken towards the government caused the program to be suspended. The current Talon government, instead, helped and promoted Ologoun to become a leading Media Director.
businesspeople, contribute to the budget (Adjovi 2003b), as well as those using the newspapers to publish advertisements. Thus, the editorial line of the periodical is often not independent from those contributing to its existence. Economic conditions incline radio and TV stations to sign contracts to program large advertising campaigns, with a side effect that news shows or political reportage must often be re-scheduled to give priority to those clients.

Censorship in Benin includes a wide array of interventions and measures designed to shape the activity of journalists, including more direct interventions, such as lawsuits against media outlets or journalists, as well as indirect strategies like intimidating phone calls or bribing critical journalists to tame their output. In this regard, the country witnessed a certain shift of modes of censorship to more indirect modes of soft censorship (Podesta 2012) especially after president Yayi Boni was in power between 2006 and 2016 (Grätz 2015).

The role of the supreme media board, HAAC (Adjovi 2003a), has been, across its different mandates, a very ambiguous one. On the one hand, it helps to increase the standards of media production and assumes a necessary watchdog position to confront media professionals over any abuses of media. On the other, it does not apply the same standards to governmental media, above all the TV department of the ORTB. In addition to that, many of its decisions seem to be quite severe and overdone, such as the closing of media outlets. Conversely, most journalists are themselves aware of the need to sanitize their profession, especially to reduce incorrect or commissioned information. Here, the journalist associations are trying to point to any abuse of media while offering training sessions and workshops to enhance the professional abilities of their colleagues.

Skills and Strategies of Media Production: The Case of Radio in Benin

In the following, I examine more precisely the activities of the young radio producers in Benin whom I was able to follow more intensively (Grätz 2014b). Radio is still the most important electronic mass media in the country. Although television is growing in its importance, with four local channels currently available, about 80 radio broadcasters are operating across the country, especially in the major urban areas such as Cotonou and Parakou. These metropolises thus offer listeners the opportunity to choose between various stations and multifaceted program schedules, including information, entertainment, advice and announcements. However, most radio stations remain underequipped, thus facing a multitude of daily challenges of a technical
(power cuts, lack of spare parts) and financial (travel funds for coverage, phone cards) nature. The competition between radio broadcasters – especially in the larger urban areas of Cotonou and Porto Novo on the coast and Parakou in the north – urges the broadcasters to develop even more compelling programs and to promote talented presenters who are able to attract many listeners. Interactive programs such as game and request shows as well as political debates (see examples below) are gaining more and more attention from listeners through increased press coverage. Thus, radio broadcasting in Benin proves to be a field of constant creativity and innovation.

On the basis of my field work data, we may discern four main factors upon which the attainment of young radio producers in Benin rests: firstly, working in an enabling environment, that is, in a radio station with less structured professional hierarchies, a large spectrum of broadcasting formats, with guidance and solidarity among colleagues and an openness to newcomers; secondly, personal creativity and skills in the development of successful genres and styles of presentations, and an apt appropriation and adaptation of media technologies; thirdly, a sensitivity to current topics and the opinions and information needs of their listeners; and finally, the maintenance of close relationships with listeners and colleagues both on and off air.

The most important aspects are certainly their skills, creativity and professional strategies. These range from informal reporting strategies to presenters’ particular rhetorical styles. Some are especially skilled in employing narrative styles such as proverbs in culture-related broadcasts, and also in their personal style of talking to and chatting with listeners who frequently evaluate a presenter according to his or her unique abilities to ‘talk the right way’, that is, to use the appropriate local vernacular. Evaluations of correct language hinge on adeptness in discussions of politics or issues of development, on the usage of appropriate neologisms, and presenters’ abilities to play with allusions. Furthermore, they need to know how to gain information when covering events or reporting from public life.

Pressure and intimidation by state authorities are the daily bread of most journalists in Benin. Often they have to struggle with direct interventions, as was the case of Berepa, a part-time journalist and teacher in the northern provincial town of Natitingou.

Berepa, a presenter from the community Radio Nanto FM in Natitingou, was caught in the crossfire in early 2011 after inviting both a representative of the state and one from the opposition to a studio discussion that revolved around the issue of the 2011 Benin NATIONAL DAY festivities planned to take place in Natitingou. Callers complained of various
unfinished but promised infrastructural projects, and questioned the overall non-transparent budget for the event. The studio guest Kassa Mampo, President of the comité de développement de Natitingou and former member of the communist party and an opponent to all political regimes since, was particularly vocal about the issue of bad municipal governance. The debate very much fuelled the ongoing discussion and rumours in town. A rally took place on one of the preceding days with participants demanding more information regarding these issues. That demonstration in May 2011 was initially forbidden and subsequently dissolved by the police – causing altercations between police forces and citizens and the death of a young man. In the course of the inquiries about this incident, Berepa and the station's director were called to report at the police station. They were issued a warning to avoid giving voice to oppositional positions. Simultaneously, Kassa Mampo was arrested and accused of being the principal instigator of the turmoil; he remains in jail. (Interview in Natitingou, March 2012).

Young radio journalists and presenters try to avoid defamations, false allegations and rumour-mongering as much as possible in their productions. They try, however, always to enhance their room to manoeuvre in promoting critical debates and information. Most radio presenters usually maintain a large network of friends and acquaintances and use these connections to improve their shows by adding relevant information and news, or to gain access to interesting studio guests. In some cases, journalists prefer to keep their information at a semi-official or informal level, in order to retain the potential to publish it at an appropriate moment. An important aspect is the ability to cope with technological challenges caused by inappropriate or defective devices, power cuts or climatic conditions.

The competition between radio stations, but also the desire to reach a larger audience and to convey political information, encourages a number of young radio presenters to develop new broadcasting formats: for example, inciting listeners to intervene in political debates. These may revolve around particular topics, or feature discussions with an eminent studio guest. People may phone in to convey their opinion or discuss the guest. This is especially the case with political talk shows, which are usually aired on Friday night or Sunday morning. Meanwhile, similar interactive debates are offered nationwide and in different languages. The most prominent shows of this type often become the topic of press coverage thereafter.

Another example is a type of radio program called grogne. Almost all radio listeners in Benin associate this term, which means ‘expressing anger’, with
call-in radio shows that enable listeners to freely and directly discuss almost any current life issue. Consequently, frequent callers to these shows are named grogneurs or faiseurs d’opinion by journalists and politicians. The mainly young grogneurs and the journalists hosting such shows contribute greatly to daily media production in Benin, constituting novel communicative spaces across different networks of actors and social spheres. Grogne shows got their designation from the very first of similar shows introduced by Golfe FM, called Grogne Matinal (morning anger), which is still broadcast by the station on weekdays. Callers may complain about any current problems in public and political life, bad experiences with institutions and authorities, but also voice critical statements with regard to the radio programme. Usually, every caller has about 90 seconds at his or her disposal. It is quite an illustrious type of show, listened to by both citizens and politicians, and has been adopted by several radio stations across the country. Callers that manage to get through to these mostly morning programs may address many topics, voice critical statements on daily problems and also discuss societal scandals. In most cases, the hosts of the show will not intervene or comment upon these statements, but have to emphasize the necessity that callers avoid any kind of defamation or false accusations, and the direct naming of persons. This successful format is primarily based on the contingent interests of radio producers and frequent listeners, and corresponds to current changes in the public sphere where these shows find their particular place – an innovative opening of media space for very instantaneous and hot local issues – and, to a lesser degree, due to the facts and issues themselves. Here, we may witness an unprecedented and (in most official media institutions) very much unparalleled genre promoted by young media producers, enabling the circulation of novel media content, thus giving rise to a unique instance of societal discourse.

A central concern for many in the field of media – and especially for media authorities such as the HAAC – has, almost inevitably, become that of the veracity of individual statements. Furthermore, debates have arisen around methods of avoiding abuse, addressing potential slander and simultaneously guaranteeing the freedom of expression of the callers, and the right of others to refute their statements. These shows have often been suspended by the HAAC but later resumed because of listeners’ and media professionals’ protests. Currently, debates continue to rage around the potential political misuses of such shows. The HAAC, together with representatives of journalists and media owners, decided in 2005 to interrupt these potentially politically charged radio programmes during periods of election campaigns (starting with the presidential elections in early 2006), in order to avoid misuse by individual politicians. Because of similar derogatory statements, most hosts of
grogne programmes now introduce each broadcast with a reminder on the
etiquette and structure, and urge listeners not to make personal aspersions.
Many grogneurs’ statements focus on local issues, especially problems with in-
frastructures in their neighbourhood, where local authorities are called upon
to monitor and finalize public projects more effectively. Some few grogneurs
have abused these possibilities, but generally the grogne format does reside in
the particular interplay of more formal and informal avenues of communica-
tion (Grätz 2014c).

Another quite telling example of a new media genre promoted by young
media professionals was the success of a political comedy production per-
formed by a group of young people hosted by Radio Planète in Cotonou under
the title Bébête infos in which politicians and other personalities were imitat-
ed, in particular the President Kérékou and his political friends before 2006.
It was successfully sold as a cassette series and later appeared on CD. Several
young radio presenters (capitalizing on previous experiences in high school
theatre companies) and the young station director, Yahouédéhou, who all also
assumed roles in recording the show, prepared the scripts.

Finally, the acknowledgement of young radio producers in Benin depends on
their day-to-day relationships with their active audiences, and a mutual close-
ness they may develop both in the physical and virtual world. With regards to
the first aspect, people often recognize them in public, greet them, share their
observations and critiques on the station's programs, may sometimes invite
radio personalities for a chat over a beer, or even to a private party at home.
Conversely, radio professionals rely on their intense contacts to the listeners
when recruiting studio guests or when collecting background information for
news coverage. Young radio presenters of one of the new independent and
community broadcasters are especially likely to engage in constant interac-
tions with their audiences through their presence at local events, when report-
ing live or interviewing people ... or by feedings news to WhatsApp groups.
Many presenters are supported by show-specific fan-clubs that often provide
them with critical assistance and even financial help. Some of the younger,
enthusiastic members of these clubs may one day eventually become radio
producers themselves, after internships and the improvement of their talents.

To meet the expectations of their listeners, most young radio personalities
purposely try to offer a wide range of very practical information. This does
not only include health advice, announcements regarding public or personal
events, services such as lost and found announcements, press reviews in several
languages, and overviews on commodity prices, but also expands to include job
offers that may even constitute the central topic of a whole program (e.g. Planète
Emploi, Radio Planète, Cotonou) and services dealing with lost children.
As I have argued earlier, media-induced closeness is not only the result of a cultural and spatial proximity of radio production; individuals relate through the personal, intimate experience of listening to the radio. In this regard, interactive radio shows in particular may establish direct contacts between presenters and listeners. Encouraged by the boom in mobile phone usage and call-in shows such as *grogne matinal*, quiz and request shows are gaining in popularity. A very successful type of show is a call-in format discussing personal and intimate problems that addresses very sensitive issues like love, jealousy, adultery, divorce, infertility and conflicts between generations (see Grätz 2014a). The success of these programs accompanied the proliferation of independent radio stations.

It is primarily the new generation of radio presenters that is able to produce these programs that are very relevant to the advance of society, with an appeal to listeners. Despite their fragmented periods of job training, this nascent generation keeps content riveting without succumbing to the superficial or sensational, engaging in radio production both as a vocation and with a pleasure that guarantees their success. The appropriation of radio technology should thus be seen as a dialogic process between listeners and producers that blurs boundaries between these categories, especially during call-in shows. The main actors in these technological dramas are skilled young media professionals, particularly the currently rising radio journalists, acting as new cultural creators, that is, as mediators and translators at the interface of different realms of interest.

Working as a young media producer may be one moment in life that is simultaneously filled with changes and options, but also with compromises and haphazard situations. The fact that a job in the media field is rarely well-paid may contribute to the tarnished reputation of the profession. In this respect, the young generation of media professionals shares a similar position when compared to other educated urban young adults with precarious yet diverse job opportunities, revenues and activities. Young emergent media professionals in West Africa are striving to find new avenues for public communication. Competing with each other for public attention, they feature, nevertheless, a high degree of solidarity, especially when it comes to the exchange of news and job opportunities.

**Conclusion**

My account focused on young media producers in the Republic of Benin who have contributed to the creation of new communication spaces in that
country, especially in flourishing urban areas. They definitely do not form part of a so-called “lost generation” (Cruise O’Brien 1996), but rather represent a new generation (in the cultural sense of the term) of dynamic youth in Africa.7 These rising media professionals, emerging in the context of growing media liberalization, strive for political engagement and a renowned position in Beninese society, rather than a straightforward career. They are compelled to make use of a variety of sources of communication to be innovative and creative in order to sustain their achievements (see also Bird 2010). A successful engagement with media translates into an increase in overall personal options and life chances also beyond the media field.

My case study underlines a process in which today’s youth in Africa may both fall under the constraints of a liberalized, volatile economy, yet creatively seize some of its opportunities to gain recognition and enhance their political commitment. Young media professionals in Benin are part of an aspiring, still precariously situated urban youth who appropriate public spaces in constructing new realms of political agency.

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7 See Diouf (2003); Diouf and Collignon (2001); Abbink and Kessel (2005); Biaya (2005); Honwana and de Boeck (2005); Boesen (2008); Sommers (2010); Ntarangwi and Massart (2015); Ugor and Mawuko-Yevugah (2015).
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