

## **Public Perception of Newspapers' Reportage of Nigeria's Democratic Process and Media Performance (2015–2020)**

Dr. Nwajei Kanayo C

Department of Theatre Arts, University of Abuja, Nigeria

[knwajei@gmail.com](mailto:knwajei@gmail.com)

**Abstract** - This study investigated audience perceptions of Nigerian newspapers' reportage of the democratic process and media performance within the post-2015 democratic era (2015–2020), based on data obtained from a 2020 nationwide field survey. Using a descriptive survey design complemented by in-depth interviews, data were collected from newspaper readers across selected states/FCT. Specify the states/FCT selection criteria for methodological clarity. A total of 902 valid questionnaires were analyzed. Indicate response rate to strengthen methodological transparency. Findings indicate that respondents perceived the quality of Nigeria's democracy since 2015 as generally low, with the aggregate democratic quality index ( $M = 23.3559$ ,  $SD = 6.28731$ ) falling below the benchmark median (25.5). Explain derivation of the benchmark median. Respondents, however, rated newspapers relatively positively on watchdog performance ( $M = 29.6741$ ,  $SD = 4.60060$ ), suggesting continued public recognition of newspapers' accountability role. Press freedom was perceived as constrained ( $M = 15.6408$ ,  $SD = 4.28450$ ), below the benchmark median (16), implying a restrictive environment for robust oversight reporting. Objectivity was perceived favourably on the right-of-reply indicator ( $M = 3.2672$ ,  $SD = 0.94851$ ). Clarify scale range for interpretive adequacy. Spearman correlation results show that perceived watchdog role was significantly related to perceived democratic quality ( $r_s = .389$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and educational qualification ( $r_s = .105$ ,  $p = .002$ ). The study concludes that while readers acknowledge newspapers' watchdog contribution, low perceived democratic quality and constrained press freedom may limit the broader democratic gains expected from media performance.

**Keywords** - Nigeria; newspapers; democratic process; public perception; watchdog journalism; press freedom; objectivity

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Newspapers remain a central institution in democratic life because they routinely translate complex political activities into public knowledge, shape the boundaries of public debate, and provide citizens with cues for judging leaders and institutions. In political communication, this democratic value of the press is often located in its capacity to inform, interpret, and scrutinize power functions that collectively justify the long-standing description of the press as the “fourth estate” or an oversight institution within the democratic architecture (Akinfeleye, 2003; Altschull, 1984). In Nigeria, where democratic legitimacy is frequently contested through electoral disputes, governance controversies, and civic dissatisfaction, newspapers are especially consequential as platforms for public reasoning and as watchdogs over political authority. Beyond simply transmitting facts, newspapers structure political reality for audiences by selecting issues, emphasizing particular frames, and repeatedly assigning salience

to certain themes. Agenda-setting scholarship underscores that the issues prioritized by the media often become the issues citizens regard as most important, thereby influencing how politics is evaluated and discussed (McCombs & Shaw, 1997). When combined with framing choices how stories are narrated, whose voices are amplified, and what causal explanations are emphasized newspaper coverage can shape political attitudes and electoral decisions, particularly during periods of intense competition and transition. This basic logic explains why, in functional democracies, the mass media is widely recognized as a strategic link between ordinary citizens and those who exercise state power (Abubakre, 2017). As the attached study similarly emphasizes, the democratic process provides the context of editorial reportage, where reportage refers to the quality and quantity of news and information published about political actors, institutions, and democratic practices in Nigeria. Nigeria's democratic journey after the return to civil rule in 1999 has been shaped by persistent struggles over electoral credibility, elite competition, and the uneven institutionalization of democratic norms. Scholars of democratization have long argued that consolidation is difficult where institutions are weak, political competition is zero-sum, and electoral processes are persistently vulnerable to manipulation (Diamond, 1988; Omotola, 2010). Within this setting, newspapers are expected to play two overlapping roles: first, as civic educators that provide citizens with reliable political knowledge; and second, as accountability agents that monitor misconduct, expose abuse, and pressure institutions toward transparency (Akinfeleye, 2003; Amodu, 2016). Yet the capacity of newspapers to perform these roles is not automatic. Media systems are embedded in political and economic contexts that may amplify or constrain professional practice. For instance, ownership structures and control mechanisms can subtly or overtly shape editorial judgement, news selection, and the ideological complexion of political coverage (Altschull, 1984). Where ownership interests align with partisan objectives, newspapers may drift from public-service imperatives toward elite-serving narratives undermining public trust and weakening the media's contribution to democratic development (Popoola, 2015; Popoola & Adegoke, 2015).

The period 2015–2020 is particularly important for understanding media democracy relations in Nigeria because it spans a historically consequential electoral transition and an era of heightened contestation over governance performance and democratic integrity. The 2015 election cycle was accompanied by intense political messaging, competing reform agendas, and widespread public anxiety about electoral violence and instability (Alli & Akowe, 2015). Within such an environment, the press is pressured in multiple directions: it must report conflicts and controversies in real time, discourage inflammatory propaganda, and still deliver balanced, factual, and socially responsible journalism that supports democratic peace and inclusion (Akinfeleye, 2003; Popoola, 2015). The study underlying this paper situates its investigation in this post-2015 democratic experience, noting that the democratic process between 2015 and 2019 “heightened debate” in Nigeria's public space and that the pattern of media coverage and prominence given to political issues became a central concern. However, democratic practice in Nigeria is not merely a function of elections occurring periodically; it also depends on the integrity of electoral governance, the protection of rights, and the rule-bound conduct of political actors and institutions. Democratic quality, as conceptualized in the study, is operationalized around core democratic components especially elections, protection of citizens' rights and freedoms and is used as a benchmark for assessing democratic performance (Dalton, 2004; Erunke, 2012; Lipset et al., 1993; Schumpeter, 2013). When elections are perceived to be militarized, captured by money politics, or skewed through intimidation and manipulation, citizens' confidence in the democratic project weakens, and the legitimacy of outcomes becomes doubtful. This is significant because elections are widely

regarded as the “quintessential” indicator of democratic quality, and failures in electoral integrity routinely contaminate broader perceptions of governance legitimacy. In this democratic context, newspapers are expected to provide sustained oversight not only of election-day events but also of governance processes between election cycles tracking public policy implementation, exposing corruption, and clarifying citizens’ rights and civic responsibilities. This expectation aligns with the normative claim that the press should function as an independent umpire, defending public interest, protecting the weak, and insisting on accountability from state actors (Akinfeleye, 2003; Amodu, 2016). The attached study’s conceptual framing similarly defines media performance as the level of accountability, transparency, and watchdog function over organs of government and society since 2015. These constraints are consistent with broader scholarship emphasizing the decisive role of ownership and power in shaping media content and political messaging (Altschull, 1984). The implications of these constraints become sharper when political competition is adversarial and when democratic politics is shaped by high-stakes struggles for power. Nigeria’s political terrain has often been described as intensely competitive, sometimes characterised by desperation, elite rivalry, and strategic conflict communication (Akintola, 2003; Popoola & Adegoke, 2015). In such climates, politicians and aligned interest groups can push media outlets toward polarizing coverage and conflict escalation, either through direct pressure or through the strategic supply of information subsidies designed to shape headlines and public interpretation (Popoola, 2015; Abubakre, 2017). This is why responsible journalism requires not only technical reporting competence but also ethical sensitivity and professional commitment to fairness, balance, and verification (Akinfeleye, 2003; Agber & Ejue, 2017). It also underscores why studying public perception is essential: citizens do not merely consume news; they interpret it through lived political experience, media literacy, and expectations about what newspapers ought to do in a democracy. Despite the centrality of these issues, empirical evidence on how Nigerian newspaper readers assess newspapers’ democratic performance especially across the post-2015 period remains insufficient. The attached work explicitly argues that there have not been enough relevant empirical studies from academia exploring citizens’ perception of newspapers’ reportage and democratic issues, making such investigation “pragmatic and germane.”

Public perception matters because legitimacy and trust are public-facing outcomes: if citizens believe the media is biased, captured, or constrained, confidence in both the press and democratic institutions can deteriorate. Conversely, if citizens perceive newspapers as credible watchdogs that hold leaders accountable, newspapers may strengthen democratic culture even in difficult institutional environments (Amodu, 2016; Uganwa, 2014). Accordingly, this study examines public perception of newspapers’ reportage of Nigeria’s democratic process and media performance in Nigeria within the 2015–2020 window (with the core operational focus of the study’s measurement emphasized as 2015–2019). It investigates readers’ perception of democratic quality, newspapers’ watchdog role, the extent of press freedom, and the perceived objectivity of editorial reportage. These constructs are crucial because democratic quality provides the contextual “state of democracy” within which media performance is evaluated; watchdog journalism captures the media’s oversight and accountability responsibilities; press freedom signals the enabling environment for independent journalism; and objectivity captures audience judgement about fairness, balance, and the opportunity for relevant actors to respond to claims published in the press. Hence, evaluating readers’ perceptions is not a peripheral exercise; it is a direct window into how citizens experience democracy through mediated political narratives and how they judge the press’s success or failure in meeting its constitutional and social responsibilities (Akinfeleye, 2003; Amodu, 2016).

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***A. Newspapers, Democracy and the Public Sphere***

The normative claim that newspapers are indispensable to democracy is rooted in the belief that citizens cannot make informed choices without reliable and accessible information. From this perspective, newspapers function as civic educators and accountability agents by explaining public issues, interpreting policy debates, and revealing governance failures that citizens may not observe directly (Akinfeleye, 2003; Asemah, 2011). This aligns with the idea that the media connect rulers and the ruled by circulating ideas and facilitating the “communication of ideas” essential for collective decision-making (Bryson, 1948; Baran & Davis, 2003). Within democratic systems, such informational functions are not merely optional; they are foundational for transparency, participation, and the legitimacy of authority (Bennett & Entman, 2001; Curran et al., 1977). Yet, the democratic value of newspapers is also contested because media institutions do not operate in a vacuum. Their structures and routines are shaped by economic pressures, political power, ownership interests, and professional norms, each of which can influence what is reported and how it is reported (Altschull, 1984; Benson & Hallin, 2007). In other words, while newspapers may be essential for democracy, they are also vulnerable to forces that can distort democratic communication, weaken accountability journalism, or shift coverage away from public interest.

### ***B. Democratic Quality and Nigeria’s Democratic Process***

Democracy is often conceptualized as rule based on citizens’ participation, the protection of rights, and the selection of leaders through credible elections. In this line of thinking, elections become the most visible indicator of democratic performance because they provide the mechanism through which citizens authorize leadership and renew consent (Omotola, 2010; Diamond, 1999). Consequently, democratic quality is frequently evaluated through the credibility of elections and the protection of rights and freedoms that make competition meaningful (Diamond, 1999). In Nigeria, the literature on democratic consolidation highlights recurring tensions around election credibility, political competition, the role of money, and the conduct of security institutions during elections (Omotola, 2010; Ayinla, 2005). These challenges are significant because they shape public confidence in democracy and influence how citizens interpret both electoral outcomes and governance performance. When democratic institutions are perceived as weak or compromised, citizens may become skeptical of political processes, leading to cynicism toward governance and distrust toward institutions that are expected to protect democratic norms (Diamond, 1999; Omotola, 2010).

### ***C. Media Performance and the Watchdog Role***

The watchdog role is central to how media performance is evaluated in democratic contexts. Watchdog journalism refers to the press acting as an oversight mechanism by scrutinizing those in power, exposing wrongdoing, and keeping governance within the limits of law and public expectations (Akinfeleye, 2003; Amodu, 2016). The logic is that the press “watches” the powerful so that citizens do not have to rely solely on official claims or political propaganda when forming political judgments (Altschull, 1984; Curran et al., 1977). When newspapers consistently prioritize accountability themes corruption, abuse of power, electoral malpractice, institutional failure audiences are more likely to perceive the press as performing its democratic role, even when broader political conditions remain difficult (Amodu, 2016; Dauda, 2018). However, watchdog performance is not guaranteed. In many contexts, watchdog reporting competes with commercial priorities,



sensationalism, elite-driven news agendas, and pressures that discourage investigative depth (Benson & Hallin, 2007; Popoola, 2015). Where sensational headlines dominate political reporting, the press may attract attention but contribute less to democratic consolidation because audiences receive more conflict narratives than evidence-based accountability information (Popoola, 2015; Baran & Davis, 2003).

#### ***D. Press Freedom as an Enabling Condition***

Press freedom is widely treated as a necessary condition for media performance because surveillance and accountability journalism require that journalists can investigate and publish without intimidation, coercion, censorship, or legal harassment (Apuke, 2016; Amodu, 2016). Where press freedom is low, journalists may avoid sensitive investigations, editors may reduce critical coverage, and media houses may adopt safer narratives that protect commercial survival rather than democratic accountability (Benson & Hallin, 2007; Altschull, 1984). Research on press freedom in Nigeria and comparable contexts suggests that constraints can emerge through formal regulation, informal political pressure, threats, arrests, civil litigation, ownership interference, and economic vulnerabilities (Apuke, 2016). Even when newspapers remain operationally active, fear of sanction can shape the boundaries of acceptable discourse, producing subtle forms of self-censorship that reduce the visibility of governance failures (Benson & Hallin, 2007; Curran et al., 1977). Consequently, public perception of press freedom matters because audiences may judge newspapers harshly if they interpret caution as bias, compromise, or political capture, even when such caution is driven by survival within a restrictive environment (Apuke, 2016; Amodu, 2016).

#### ***E. Objectivity, Balance and Credibility in Political Reportage***

Objectivity is often defined in journalism literature as fairness, neutrality, balance, and verification, especially in political reporting where competing actors and narratives demand careful presentation. Objectivity is closely tied to credibility: audiences are more likely to trust newspapers when they perceive that coverage is balanced, that parties are given opportunities to respond, and that reporting is not merely partisan messaging (Asemah, 2011; Baran & Davis, 2003). In plural and politically polarized societies, however, objectivity becomes difficult because identity affiliations, political loyalties, and elite influence can pull reporting toward selective emphasis (Popoola, 2015; Akintola, 2003). This debate is relevant to public perception studies because citizens do not only evaluate the presence of political stories; they also evaluate tone, balance, fairness, and whether coverage appears to serve the public interest or a particular political camp (Berelson & Janowitz, 1953; Bennett & Entman, 2001). Where newspapers are seen as consistently favourable to ruling-party interests or proprietorial agendas, audiences may interpret reportage as propaganda rather than democratic journalism (Altschull, 1984).

#### ***F. Agenda-Setting, Framing and the Power of Emphasis***

Two theoretical traditions strongly shape how scholars understand newspapers' influence on public perception: agenda-setting and framing. Agenda-setting research argues that the issues the media emphasize become the issues audiences are more likely to regard as important, meaning that repeated coverage can shape the public's sense of what matters most in politics (McCombs & Shaw, 1997; Baran & Davis, 2003). Framing scholarship extends this by emphasizing that newspapers also influence how issues are understood by selecting certain angles, interpretations, and narrative structures, thereby guiding the meaning citizens attach to events (Bennett & Entman, 2001). In

election contexts, framing can be especially powerful because newspapers may present campaigns as issue-based competition, personality contests, conflict dramas, or moral battles. Each frame can produce different audience reactions hope, fear, cynicism, or mobilization and these reactions shape how democratic quality is evaluated (Alli & Akowe, 2015; Popoola, 2015). Thus, newspapers' influence is not only about what they report but how they present political realities over time.

### ***G. Gatekeeping and News Production Decisions***

Gatekeeping theory provides a complementary perspective by focusing on how news is selected, processed, and published. Gatekeeping emphasizes that newsroom decisions are shaped by professional judgment and organizational routines, but also by management policy, advertiser influence, legal risks, audience preference, and political constraints (Baran & Davis, 2003; Benson & Hallin, 2007). In politically sensitive environments, gatekeeping can determine whether issues such as corruption, security misconduct, electoral malpractice, or judicial compromise receive sustained coverage or are minimized to avoid backlash (Amodu, 2016; Apuke, 2016). Because gatekeeping decisions shape what readers see consistently, they also shape perception. Over time, citizens may come to believe that newspapers are either courageous watchdogs or timid institutions depending on what they observe in coverage patterns, editorial boldness, and investigative depth (Berelson & Janowitz, 1953; Dauda, 2018).

### ***H. Ownership, Control and Political Influence***

Ownership influence is one of the most persistent themes in the literature on media performance. Classic scholarship argues that media content tends to reflect the interests of those who control resources and power, implying that newspapers may serve dominant political or economic actors rather than the public when ownership priorities conflict with democratic responsibilities (Altschull, 1984; Curran et al., 1977). Contemporary discussions reinforce this by showing how ownership structures shape editorial direction, story placement, political slant, and the boundaries of investigative reporting (Benson & Hallin, 2007). In Nigeria, where newspapers may be privately owned by politically connected proprietors or operate within environments shaped by ruling-party influence, ownership becomes important for understanding why audiences may question neutrality and objectivity (Popoola, 2015; Akintola, 2003). When citizens believe that “who pays the piper” determines editorial tune, they may interpret reportage as elite competition rather than public-service journalism, reducing trust in the media's democratic role (Altschull, 1984).

### ***I. Empirical Studies on Elections and Newspaper Coverage***

Empirical studies on election reporting often show that newspapers can either strengthen democratic participation by providing civic information and issue-based analysis or undermine it through sensationalism, conflict emphasis, and partisan alignment (Popoola, 2015). Election-related news is also shaped by political events and strategic communication, including public debates around peace accords, violence prevention messaging, and campaign narratives that newspapers disseminate to audiences (Alli & Akowe, 2015; Abubakre, 2017). Studies on political competition in Nigeria also highlight that democratic struggles can become intense and adversarial, producing an environment where media narratives may be contested and journalists may face pressure from political actors (Akintola, 2003; Ayinla, 2005). This reinforces the importance of examining public perception: citizens evaluate newspapers against their lived experience of politics, their knowledge of political

struggles, and their expectations about what journalism should do during democratic transitions (Berelson & Janowitz, 1953; Baran & Davis, 2003).

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### ***A. Research Design***

The study adopted descriptive survey design because it sought to assess respondents' perceptions of newspapers' reportage of the quality of Nigeria's democracy and media performance. While the design was survey-oriented, the data generated contained both quantitative and qualitative components. Quantitative data were gathered using a structured questionnaire, consistent with the view of survey research as an approach that draws up questions to which selected members of a population respond. Qualitative data were obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with senior editors in selected newspapers, with the interview approach justified as a face-to-face conversation that permits deeper probing into opinions, attitudes, experiences, and factors influencing reportage of political issues.

#### ***B. Population of the Study***

The population of the study was estimated at approximately 10,430,020, drawn from selected local government areas across Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory. Nigeria constituted the broader study setting, but six states were selected one from each geopolitical zone to represent the country, after which one local government area was chosen from each senatorial district in the selected states; Abuja's local governments were selected from the geographical zones of the territory. The population estimates relied on projected figures because no national population census was conducted after 2006. The sampled local governments were chosen on the assumption that they contain educated men and women who read newspapers regularly and can evaluate reportage of the post-2015 political process.

#### ***C. Sample Size Determination***

The study arrived at a survey sample size of 902 respondents. The procedure involved computing an initial sample size using a standard online sample size calculator at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, producing 601 respondents, and then applying an oversampling logic recommended in the literature to account for non-response by increasing the base size by 40%–50%. The document demonstrates the oversampling arithmetic used to reach 902 ( $601 + 0.50 \times 601 = 902$ ). The proportional distribution of the sample across selected LGAs was presented in the study's tables.

#### ***D. Sampling Techniques and Procedures***

A multistage cluster sampling procedure combining probability and non-probability techniques was adopted for feasibility, given Nigeria's size and six geopolitical zones. In the first stage, one state was selected from each geopolitical zone through simple random sampling by balloting. The selected states were stratified into senatorial districts, after which one local government was picked from each senatorial district through simple random sampling by balloting. In the second stage, communities with educated persons who read newspapers were purposively selected, and respondents were reached through snowball sampling until the required sample size for each LGA was achieved; this was justified by the presence of remote communities where media reach could be low. For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to select five participants drawn from newspaper houses relevant to the readership focus, with the purpose of eliciting professional perspectives on factors influencing political story selection, coverage, usage, and placement.

### ***E. Instruments of Data Collection***

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and audio recording devices for interviews. The questionnaire was structured into two sections with 25 items, and the items were grouped to address the research questions: items 6–10 for research question one, items 11–15 for research question two, items 16–20 for research question three, and items 21–25 for research question four. For the qualitative aspect, note-taking and recording devices were used to capture interview data.

### ***F. Validity of Instruments***

Validity was treated as the extent to which the instrument measures what it is designed to measure, with emphasis on internal and external validity. External validity, defined as generalizability from sample to population, was linked directly to the study's sampling process, which the document states followed scientific methods and thus supports validity. In addition, the questionnaire content was subjected to scrutiny by research experts and experienced supervisors to ensure it appropriately assessed the study objectives.

### ***G. Reliability of Instruments***

Reliability was treated as consistency and repeatability of measurement outcomes. A test-retest method was adopted to establish reliability: 15 copies of the questionnaire were administered to 15 selected respondents, and after two weeks the same questionnaire was administered again to the same respondents; responses were computed using Pearson Product Moment correlation, yielding a coefficient of 0.74, which was considered acceptable evidence of reliability.

### ***H. Methods of Data Collection***

Research assistants were recruited and trained to administer questionnaires in the selected locations. A total of 902 copies of the questionnaire were distributed under close monitoring by the researcher, and some questionnaires were left with respondents for one week before retrieval. The study reports that 903 questionnaires were administered, but one questionnaire was unsuitable for analysis, leaving 902 valid instruments for quantitative analysis. For the qualitative component, interviews were conducted with senior editors and professionals from selected newspapers; the study records interviewees and the dates spanning late 2019 through early 2020.

### ***I. Methods of Data Analysis***

Data analysis combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative data were presented using frequency tables and simple percentages, followed by interpretation aligned with each research question. Hypotheses were tested using chi-square statistics using SPSS (version 17.0) For correlational analysis, the study used Spearman's rho because the values did not meet Pearson correlation assumptions (normal distribution and interval-scale data). The document explains that Spearman rank-order correlation is a nonparametric test suitable for ordinal variables or continuous data and was used to assess the direction and strength of associations among study variables. Qualitative interview data were analyzed using an explanation-building technique based on emerging themes, which was adopted to develop general explanations applicable across cases.

## **4. RESULTS**

This section presents the results of the study based strictly on the analyzed survey data and SPSS outputs contained in the attached document. A total of 902 valid questionnaires were used for analysis



because, although 903 questionnaires were retrieved, one was found unsuitable for analysis. The results are presented in line with the research questions and the measured constructs: perceived democratic quality, perceived watchdog role of newspapers, perceived press freedom, and perceived objectivity of newspaper reportage, as well as the correlational test of the predictors of watchdog role.

#### ***A. Demographic characteristics of respondents***

The gender distribution shows that 544 respondents (60.3%) were male and 358 respondents (39.7%) were female. Respondents' educational qualifications were distributed as follows: non-formal education 1.9%, basic education 12.1%, secondary school certificate 46.0%, tertiary education 26.9%, and postgraduate certification 13.1%. The state distribution indicates that respondents were drawn from six states and the FCT, with Lagos having the largest share (30.5%) and Abuja (26.2%), followed by Bauchi (13.2%), Kaduna (12.6%), Enugu (9.3%) and Delta (8.2%). In relation to respondents' main source of news, print media constituted 58.6%, social media 26.4%, and electronic media 15.0%.

#### ***Newspaper readers' perception of the quality of democracy in Nigeria since 2015***

To answer the first research question, respondents rated multiple indicators of democratic quality, covering representation, separation of powers, electoral credibility, level playing field, freedom of expression, protection of rights, and rule of law. These items were presented as positively worded indices in Table

*Table 1: Perception of elements of democratic quality*

<b>Democratic quality indices</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Political actors have represented the interest of the electorate since 2015	902	1.0355	0.20228
Separation of powers across arms of government	902	1.9723	1.22873
Elections are free and fair	902	1.5344	0.84309
Level playing field for all who contest power	902	1.8093	1.08833
Freedom of expression by citizens	902	2.6098	1.31947
Government sincere about protecting citizens' rights	902	2.2428	1.27637
Political office holders abide by rule of law	902	1.42018	0.830704

The results show generally low mean scores on several core democratic indicators, including political representation ( $M = 1.0355$ ) and elections being free and fair ( $M = 1.5344$ ). In the same table narrative, the document reports that 68.5% of respondents strongly disagreed that elections were free and fair.

The study also presented additional indicators as negatively worded indices in Table 2, capturing perceived electoral malpractice and structural problems in elections.

*Table 2: Mean scores on perceived quality of democracy*

<b>Perceived democratic quality indices</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Security agents take sides during elections	902	2.2439	1.08380
Politicians hijack the electoral process	902	1.2251	0.53232
Rigging of results is commonplace	902	2.0188	1.17346
Voters are induced financially to vote	902	1.3980	0.80102

Government in power determines election outcomes	902	2.0532	1.18418
Those cheated in elections cannot get justice in court	902	1.7927	1.18173

The statistic explains that these negatively worded items were treated using reverse scoring in computing democratic quality. Based on the aggregate computation reported in the results discussion, the overall democratic quality score was low:  $M = 23.3559$ ,  $SD = 6.28731$ , and this fell below the benchmark median value of 25.5, indicating low perceived democratic quality during the post-2015 democratic period measured by the survey.

### ***Newspaper readers' perception of the watchdog role of newspapers since 2015***

For the second research question, the study computed an aggregate score representing readers' perception of newspapers' watchdog role. The reported results indicate that respondents perceived newspapers positively in terms of watchdog performance, with an overall mean score of  $M = 29.6741$  and  $SD = 4.60060$ . To further show the distribution of the key computed constructs by gender, the SPSS output in the document presents the mean and standard deviation of democratic quality, watchdog role, and press freedom by gender as follows.

*Table 3: Democratic Quality, Watchdog Role, and Press Freedom by Gender*

Gender	Statistic	Democratic Quality	Watchdog Role	Press Freedom
Male (n=544)	Mean	23.2426	29.6893	15.8088
	Std. Deviation	6.21114	4.69679	4.41413
Female (n=358)	Mean	23.5279	29.6508	15.3855
	Std. Deviation	6.40623	4.45688	4.07245
Total (N=902)	Mean	23.3559	29.6741	15.6408
	Std. Deviation	6.28731	4.60060	4.28450

The table shows that the overall means used in interpretation are consistent with the reported aggregate indices for democratic quality (23.3559), watchdog role (29.6741), and press freedom (15.6408).

### ***Extent of press freedom enjoyed by newspaper publishers since 2015***

To answer the third research question, press freedom was measured using eight indicators capturing victimization, harassment, imprisonment risks, legal pressures, rights violations, reduced freedom relative to pre-2015, threats, and fear of offending those in power. The item-level descriptive statistics are presented in Table 4.

*Table 4: Descriptive statistics for aggregated press freedom*

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
Press freedom (aggregate)	902	15.6408	4.28450	0.163

The statistic explains that the press freedom index has a highest possible value of 32, lowest of 0, and a median benchmark of 16; because the computed mean (15.6408) falls below the median, the study interprets this as press freedom being perceived as below the benchmark level in the period measured.

### ***B. Extent of objectivity in newspapers' reportage since 2015***

Objectivity of newspapers was assessed using a negatively worded statement regarding whether newspapers provide equal opportunities to parties to respond to a published story. The descriptive statistic is presented in Table 5.

*Table 5: Responses on newspaper objectivity*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
Newspapers do not provide equal opportunities to parties to respond to a published story	902	3.2672	0.94851

The interprets the mean score of 3.2672 as respondents generally disagreeing with the negative claim, implying that newspapers were perceived as relatively objective in reportage.

### ***C. Correlates of watchdog role (Spearman rank correlation test)***

To establish the correlates of newspapers' watchdog role, the study used Spearman rank-order correlation and presented results in Table 6. The variables tested against watchdog role include educational qualification, state, age, press freedom, democratic quality, and objectivity.

*Table 6: Spearman rank correlation results for correlates of watchdog role*

<b>Variable (with Watchdog Role)</b>	<b>Spearman's rho</b>	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>	<b>N</b>
Educational qualification	0.105**	0.002	902
State	0.042	0.208	902
Age	0.049	0.144	902
Press freedom	0.005	0.889	902
Democratic quality	0.389**	0.000	902
Objectivity of newspapers	0.011	0.746	902

The interpretation indicates that watchdog role has a statistically significant positive relationship with democratic quality ( $r_s = .389$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and with educational qualification ( $r_s = .105$ ,  $p = .002$ ). However, watchdog role shows no statistically significant relationship with press freedom ( $r_s = .005$ ,  $p = .889$ ), objectivity ( $r_s = .011$ ,  $p = .746$ ), state ( $r_s = .042$ ,  $p = .208$ ), or age ( $r_s = .049$ ,  $p = .144$ ).

### ***D. Additional descriptive evidence on perceived reliability (corruption reporting item)***

Beyond the aggregate indices, the paper also reports strong perceptions on specific items. For example, on the statement that "Newspapers are no longer reliable in publishing stories of political

corruption,” 65.9% strongly agreed ( $n = 594$ ) and 22.8% agreed ( $n = 206$ ), indicating a strong perceived reliability concern on corruption-related reportage.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings show a clear pattern in public perception. First, respondents rated the quality of Nigeria’s democracy since 2015 as low, with the aggregate democratic quality score ( $M = 23.3559$ ) falling below the benchmark median (25.5), reflecting dissatisfaction with key democratic indicators such as election credibility and institutional fairness. Second, respondents rated newspapers positively on watchdog performance ( $M = 29.6741$ ), suggesting that readers still perceive newspapers as playing accountability roles even within a democratic environment they consider weak. Third, press freedom was perceived as constrained ( $M = 15.6408$ ), below the benchmark median (16), implying that intimidation, legal pressures, and fear of offending those in power may limit the extent of rigorous investigative reporting and robust democratic oversight. Fourth, on the objectivity indicator used, respondents generally perceived newspapers as relatively objective ( $M = 3.2672$ ), implying that newspapers are seen as providing opportunities for parties to respond to published stories. Finally, the correlation results show that perceived watchdog role is significantly related to perceived democratic quality ( $r_s = .389$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and educational qualification ( $r_s = .105$ ,  $p = .002$ ), but not related to perceived press freedom or objectivity. This suggests that how citizens rate democracy is linked to how they rate newspapers’ watchdog performance, and that education strengthens the evaluation of media roles.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, in the post-2015 democratic era assessed through the 2020 survey, newspaper readers generally perceived the quality of Nigeria’s democracy as low, with the aggregate democratic quality score ( $M = 23.3559$ ) falling below the benchmark median (25.5). At the same time, respondents perceived newspapers as performing a relatively positive watchdog role ( $M = 29.6741$ ), indicating that readers still credit newspapers with accountability functions despite dissatisfaction with democratic outcomes. The study also finds that the operating environment for journalism was perceived as constrained, as the press freedom index ( $M = 15.6408$ ) was below the median benchmark (16), suggesting that intimidation, legal pressures, and fear of offending those in power can limit the depth of democratic oversight reporting. On objectivity, readers generally perceived newspapers as fair, based on the right-of-reply indicator ( $M = 3.2672$ ). Finally, watchdog performance was significantly associated with perceived democratic quality ( $r_s = .389$ ,  $p = .000$ ) and educational qualification ( $r_s = .105$ ,  $p = .002$ ), showing that perceptions of media performance and democratic performance are linked, and that education shapes how audiences evaluate newspapers’ watchdog function.

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