

Influence of the Watchdog Role of Nigerian Journalists on Public Perception of President Buhari’s Anti-Corruption Crusade

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The watchdog role of journalists constitutes a vital element of journalism. It helps curb corruption and enthrone good governance. Unfortunately, corruption has thrived at virtually all strata of the Nigerian society, with the most endemic committed by individuals in positions of authority. This article examines the influence of journalists’

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watchdog role on public perception of President Muhammadu Buhari's anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. A national survey of media consumers in Nigeria revealed that public perception of anti-corruption movements significantly depends on exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country. The article notes that, while there is a very low level of audience exposure to media reports on corruption cases in Nigeria, the little media hype on President Buhari's anti-corruption efforts has not elicited public support for the anti-corruption crusade. The article concludes that many Nigerian journalists have yet to prioritize watchdog reporting and recommends training in investigative journalism skills to fulfill this role effectively.

Keywords: watchdog journalism, anti-corruption, journalists, investigative reporting, agenda-setting

The watchdog role of journalists is a critical component of their function in curbing corruption. It requires journalists to go beyond their normal duties of informing, educating, and entertaining to expose wrongdoings in the public interest—acts that perpetrators would otherwise prefer hidden. This journalistic perspective posits that journalists primarily exist to curb corruption by closely monitoring the government, its agencies, and parastatals, with a view to exposing wrongdoing, abuse of office, or malfeasance. The watchdog role appears to be embedded in journalists' self-definition and in the public's expectation of the media as the fourth estate of the realm.

Proponents of watchdog journalism believe it can drive societal reforms. Indeed, numerous examples from the Western world show how watchdog journalists promote transparency in government decision making, laws, and policies, resulting in changes in governments. The removal of President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines from office in 2001 was initiated by reports from a team of journalists indicting the president for not disclosing some of his assets (Coronel, 2010). Watchdog journalism has also been advanced as a checkmate against fake news, disinformation, and misinformation (Karadimitriou et al., 2022).

However, despite its lofty ideals, it is worth noting that the practice of watchdog journalism plummeted at the turn of the 21st century. For instance, in the Philippines, watchdog journalism has been muzzled by technological disruptions, digital populism, tighter market competition, labor precarities, and the political pressures of an increasingly authoritarian regime, with journalists struggling to establish themselves as sources of information in the society (Estella, 2021). In other democracies, such as Australia, Belgium, Canada, Chile, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, and Italy, watchdog journalism is challenged by declining revenue and a lack of trained staff (Karadimitriou et al., 2022). In fact, the emergence of citizen journalism and declining audience interest in mainstream media news products have, in recent times, distorted the identity and locus of journalism in the society.

Yet, understanding the impact of journalism on audience perception of anti-corruption crusades is essential for those concerned about promoting good governance, democracy, and the professionalization of journalism, including media managers, legislators, scholars, and press freedom advocates. While

substantial scholarly investigations have identified a significant effect of the watchdog role of journalists on audiences (Hamada, 2020; Kleinnijenhui, Hoof, & Atteveldt, 2019), these studies have predominantly covered Western audiences, characterized by mature democracies, high literacy levels, and well-developed media personnel and infrastructure. Thus, the primary goal of this study is to ascertain whether the strong influence of journalists' watchdog role on public perception of anti-corruption efforts has become an international trend.

Nigeria is a non-Western, postcolonial, unindustrialized nascent democracy in sub-Saharan Africa characterized by systemic weakness of political institutions, welfare services, and media policies (Ayedun-Aluma, 2017). Nigerian journalists have been reputed for culture-rooted watchdog reporting. An examination of Nigerian journalists' role in monitoring and exposing corrupt practices in Nigeria shows that they have served as watchdogs, keeping colonial authorities in check and significantly influencing public policy formulation and implementation. In the post-independent era, they have also challenged the unfortunate Nigerian militocracy and helped in truncating Obasanjo's third term bid. Nigerian journalists have also monitored the oil subsidy saga, mismanagement within the Nigerian National Petroleum Company, and the government's handling of the Boko Haram menace. Additionally, they have scrutinized the activities of the Bureau for Public Enterprise and played a role in President Jonathan's ascension to power following the passing of President Yar'Adua (Uwakwe, 2015).

President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in Nigeria assumed office on May 29, 2015, with the anti-corruption crusade as one of its major policy thrusts. His government implemented some excellent programs and legal instruments to curtail corruption. These include the Governance Code, Code of Conduct Bureau, Treasury Single Account, Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, and Whistle-Blowing, to mention but a few.

Despite these oversight efforts, corruption seems unabated in Nigeria. For instance, the recent corruption allegation against the Accountant General of the Federation under Buhari's presidency involved a whopping sum of ₦80 billion (Sanni, 2022). Worse still, more than ₦2 billion allocated for clearing pension arrears owed to federal civil servants was allegedly mismanaged by the former chairman of the Presidential Task Force on Pension Reforms—Abdulasheed Maina (Ejekwonyilo, 2021).

The Nigerian judiciary, which should be the arrowhead in the war against corruption, sadly, has not been immune to its grip. On October 7, 2016, Justices John Okoro and Sylvester Ngwuta of the Supreme Court and five others were arrested by the operatives of the Department of State Service (DSS) over alleged corruption. Despite criticisms and condemnations of how the executive arm used the DSS to intimidate and arrest the judges, approximately ₦270 million was allegedly recovered from the houses of the judges at the end of the arrest (Daniel, Umoru, & Nnochiri, 2016).

The pervasiveness of corruption in Nigeria has gained global attention, such that, in the latest global Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International (2024) declared Nigeria the 140th most corrupt nation on the planet. According to the global graft watchdog, corruption is the abuse of authorized power for a private advantage. The above circumstance indicates a growing need for accountability and

transparency in both the public and private sectors, creating favorable conditions for watchdog reporting to flourish (Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023).

Interestingly, journalists in Nigeria have devoted significant media time and space to reporting and commenting on corruption cases. Additionally, there are many content analytical studies on media coverage and the reportage of corruption cases and scandals in the country (Edmond & Wilson, 2018; Okon & Ekpe, 2018). Therefore, as the quest for journalism reform and professionalization continues even locally among media managers, editors, journalism educators, and scholars, this study aims to provide data about the effect of Nigerian journalists' watchdog reports on the public perception of President Muhammadu Buhari's anti-corruption crusade in the country. The motive is to identify the significance of the watchdog role of journalists in public perception of contemporary anti-corruption efforts in Nigeria and to provide policy directives that will be useful in developing strategies to stem the tide of corruption in the country.

The Concept of the Watchdog Role of Journalists

The idea of journalists as watchdogs is not a new notion. It dates back to the 17th century, when traditional liberal scholars contended that transparency and openness were the strongest safeguards against abuses of power (Karadimitriou et al., 2022). Since then, the watchdog notion has gained wide support among nations, such that many countries (including Nigeria in Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution) have entrenched, in their statute books, provisions authorizing journalists to play the watchdog role by monitoring those in power to ensure accountability and responsibility to the people. This notion that journalists exist primarily to check those in public office and fight against all forms of corruption has institutionalized the media as the fourth estate of the realm.

It is important to clarify how we conceptualize the watchdog role of journalists. Defining watchdog reporting has long been a difficult issue, as many news reporters attest that all newsgathering and reportage involve watchdogging. Some doubt that there should be a different classification labeled watchdog reporting, since this ought to be the main feature of all good journalistic writings. Nonetheless, when interrogated, reporters admitted that because of daily deadline pressures and staffing constraints, many news reports lacked a strong investigative angle. Moreover, if watchdog reporting entails monitoring and exposing misconduct others wish to conceal, then most news reports do not qualify as watchdog reporting. In fact, this position is supported by one of the most recent definitions of watchdog reporting given by Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE). They define watchdog reporting as the coverage of issues of significance to audience members through one's own drive and experience. Much of the time, the persons involved in the reports wish the issues under investigation to stay covered (IRE, 2008).

Notably, Aucoin (2005) defines watchdog reporting through five clear qualities: (i) disclosure of facts, (ii) relevance to a matter of public importance, (iii) exposure of information that individuals or groups seek to conceal, (iv) uncovering through the journalist's creative, fact-finding efforts, and (v) the intent to motivate change. Aucoin (2005) stresses a clear distinction between genuine watchdog reporting and daily newspaper reporting. Genuine watchdog reporting involves a thorough journalistic investigation of issues that significantly impact the lives of the masses. In contrast, daily newspaper reporting is often

characterized by ventures that use secret cameras and other disputable investigative procedures to monitor issues with limited public impact, motivated more by entertainment than journalistic values.

Indeed, the watchdog role can take many forms, encompassing a scope of journalistic whistle-blowing, irrespective of the quality, target audience, or the media outlet through which the information is amplified. It also entails the watchdog journalist observing the everyday functions of the government on a routine basis. The intention behind the exposure or who initiates it does not matter. The fundamental feature of watchdog reporting is exposing malfeasance for the well-being of the society. Investigative journalism, where reporters exercise due diligence to uncover misconduct, is perhaps, the most popular type of watchdog reporting (Coronel, 2010).

Journalists as Watchdogs

The watchdog theory of the press provides a useful foundation for discussing journalists' responsibility for society's welfare. It challenges journalists' ingenuity to develop new ways of serving their communities and encourages media professionals to see themselves as frontline participants in preserving good governance and protecting citizens from the pangs of corruption. The theory assumes that journalists should monitor and assess governments and other organizations to ensure that they do not become corrupt or exceed their power. The main idea of the watchdog theory is that journalists must guard citizens against abuses by the government, powerful people, or organizations. This theory is a normative approach developed by Lichtenberg (1990).

The earliest known journalistic wars against corruption can be traced back to the 1690 pioneer newspaper in the United States, *Publick Occurrence*, credited to the printer Benjamin Harris. Its first publication uncovered the alleged cruel maltreatment of French war captives and alleged sexual harassment (Feldstain, 2006, as cited in Macha, 2013). Later, during the 1920s—known as the muckraking era—journalists actively pursued investigative stories, exposing corrupt practices of businesses and governments (Macha, 2013).

A free press can fulfill its democratic duties of providing information useful to voters to promote public debate. Since the fundamental role of the government is to protect liberty, a watchdog is needed to guard against deviations from that role. Accordingly, in Nigeria, journalists have, throughout the years, performed the watchdog function in the battle for the nation's autonomy and affected the policies and activities of the colonial government and corporate governance. Even more recently, in the present democratic dispensation, watchdog journalists played a part in exposing the fraudulent deals in the National Assembly, in which Alhaji Salisu Buhari, the first Speaker of the House of Representatives in the Obasanjo administration, was accused of falsifying his age and academic certificates. The scandal led to his removal from office (Yushau, 2009, as cited in Macha, 2013).

Citizens in a democracy, as the ultimate decision makers, need a wealth of information to make informed political decisions. It is the postulation of the watchdog theory that journalists serve as the people's watchdog, monitoring and assessing the established power of the government. In Nigeria, watchdog journalists played a crucial role in exposing the certificate forgery case against Chief Evans

Enwerem, the first Senate President during the Obasanjo presidency. The saga, which later became known as the "Enwerem gate," resulted in the removal of Chief Enwerem from office. Enwerem's trouble began when *Tell* magazine published an edition in July 1999, titled "Enwerem in Trouble," which brought up his alleged fraudulent credential (Banjo, 2013). Following investigations, Enwerem was impeached over allegations of forgery regarding his age and academic qualifications.

The above notwithstanding, contemporary discourses on watchdog journalism show that watchdog journalism seems to be waning in many countries, including Nigeria, amid rising incidences of corruption (Musa & Antwi-Boateng, 2023; Nugent, 2022). Using audience perception of President Buhari's anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria as a dependent variable, this article attempts to test the Watchdog theory of the press against the realities of the contemporary challenges of media practice worldwide. This becomes more imperative because, whereas this theory was developed within the context of the United States, with its reasonably free media systems in the 1990s, it seems unclear whether the propositions of the theory will still come true in Third World countries, especially the contemporary Nigerian environment characterized by weak public institutions, low literacy levels, deep-seated ethnic rivalry, and poor media policy. This leads us to the first two research questions and the first hypothesis:

RQ1: To what extent have Nigerian public been exposed to media reports about scourge of corruption under the anti-corruption efforts of President Buhari?

RQ2: To what extent have these media reports influenced public perception of the anti-corruption efforts of President Muhammadu Buhari?

H1: Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari is dependent on the public exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country.

Journalists as Agenda Setters

Again, the agenda-setting paradigm can provide a theoretical springboard for a fruitful discussion of the watchdog role of journalists. Agenda setting implies that journalists can choose and emphasize certain topics, causing the public to perceive the issues as important. It is a process of journalists reporting certain issues frequently and conspicuously, leading large segments of the public to perceive those issues as more significant and urgent than others (Coleman, McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2009). This theory describes how the importance attached to a particular issue is transferred from the news media to people in general.

Journalists can set public agendas to trigger investigations into wrongdoing in the conduct of public affairs. A good example is in 2018, when a team of watchdog journalists from Romania and Bulgaria known as RISE Project and BIVOL uncovered a misappropriation of European Union (EU) funds in their respective countries. The investigations were carried out to expose the web of multinational criminal groups and how they gain access to public funds. The investigation exposed a network of CEOs, consultants, and public servants who profited from a lack of public supervision on EU-funded projects. The efforts of the watchdog journalists led to the prosecution of the perpetrators (Nugent, 2022).

The intellectual roots of agenda-setting theory have been credited to Lippmann (1922), who argued that the news media construct our view of the world. In reference to this, Cohen (1963, as cited in Baran, 2009), one of the proponents of this theory, states that the media may not mention to us what to think; however, they undoubtedly mention to us what to think about. It was the seminal work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) on "The Agenda setting Function of Mass Media" that formalized the theory. The development of proof for the agenda-setting function of journalists was one significant connection in a chain of academic studies that signaled a transition from the era of the limited media-effects paradigm to the new horizon of the conditionally powerful media stage.

It is worth noting that agenda-setting is not the aftereffect of any malicious arrangement by reporters to manipulate the psyches of the audience. Rather, it is an unintentional side-effect of the need to focus news stories (McCombs, 2004). Agenda setting is the journalist's ability, through regular news reportage, to raise the significance of an issue in the consciousness of the audience. Put in another way, it is the routine gatekeeping process, in the light of ethical values, that leads to the audience perceiving few issues as being more serious and important than others.

Agenda-setting theory confers on the media the ability to convey the information that citizens need to govern themselves effectively, including information that discourages antisocial and corrupt behaviors. The theory is, therefore, relevant to this study, as its tenets express the same paradigm as the thrust of this study, namely: journalists are agenda setters who can set the public agenda, especially in a manner that deters corrupt practices in the society. Therefore, using public support for President Muhammadu Buhari's anti-corruption efforts as a measure of the impact of journalists' watchdog role, the following two research questions and a hypothesis are formulated to guide this study.

RQ3: To what extent have media reports elicited public support for the anti-corruption efforts of President Muhammadu Buhari?

RQ4: What is the nature of the influence these media reports have had on the anti-corruption efforts of President Muhammadu Buhari?

H2: There is a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari.

Methodology

A survey research design is employed in the study. This is considered appropriate, since the work is a perception-based assessment study measuring the social effects of media coverage of corruption cases on the public perception of the anti-corruption efforts of the Buhari administration. Survey research possesses the capability of high representativeness of a large population, such as Nigeria, which translates to good statistical significance, resulting in greater precision in terms of measuring the data gathered. This study involves obtaining the opinions of Nigerians, who are the media consumers, on their perceived impacts of media coverage of corruption cases in Nigeria.

The population of the study is 211,493,324 literate adults in Nigeria who have access to conventional mainstream media or an online platform known as social media. This is the projected population figure by the National Population Commission, as cited in the National Bureau of Statistics Report of 2021. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula, a sample size of 384 is drawn with a 0.05 error margin. Krejcie and Morgan's formula states thus:

$$S = X^2NP(1-P) \div d^2(N-1) + X^2P(1-P).$$

Where

S = required sample size

X = confidence level, e.g., 1.96 for 95%

N = population size

P = population proportion (assumed to be 0.5 (50%))

d = degree of accuracy = 5% or 0.05

For this study, therefore, the sample size is:

$$\begin{aligned} & 1.96^2 \times 211,493,324 \times 0.5 (1 - 0.5) \div 0.05^2 \times (211,493,324 - 1) + 1.96^2 \times 0.5 (1 - 0.5) \\ & (3.8416 \times 211,493,324 \times 0.25) \div (528,733.31 + 0.96) \\ & 203,118,188.37 \div 528,734.27 = 384.16 \\ & S = 384.16 \text{ or } 384 \text{ approximately.} \end{aligned}$$

A multistage sampling technique was used, which included cluster, simple random, purposive, convenience, and accidental sampling techniques. In stage one, the entire country is clustered along the six geopolitical zones, and in stage two, simple random sampling is employed to choose one state from each zone. The following states are thus selected: Lagos (South-West), Adamawa (North-East), Rivers (South-South), Kaduna (North-West), Ebonyi (South-East), and Benue (North-Central).

In stage three, the capital territories of the six selected states are further selected using the purposive sampling technique. The method is adopted at this stage because it affords the researchers the opportunity to consider typical cases that may quickly and easily provide the required information. The capital cities are chosen based on the knowledge that most of the mainstream mass media, such as newspapers, television, magazines, and radio, are domiciled in the state capitals and will therefore have the greater part of their reach and audiences in these cities. Moreover, compared with other parts, these cities have, relatively speaking, more social amenities and a higher population density than other towns and are, therefore, likely to contain the greatest number of literate people who can respond to the issues raised in this study.

In stage four, copies of the research instrument, for convenience purposes, are distributed equally to the individual states. The result of the distribution covers the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria, comprising North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South, and South-West. One state was sampled from each zone. The states and their capital territories are Benue—Makurdi, Adamawa—Yola, Kaduna—Kaduna, Ebonyi—Abakaliki, Rivers—Port-Harcourt, and Lagos—Ikeja. The study took place in the

state capitals of the six selected states, where 64 respondents were selected from each, giving a total of 384.

Finally, in stage five, copies of the research instrument are distributed to residents in the selected capital cities with the help of five trained research assistants using the accidental sampling technique. This technique is adopted at this stage because not all contacted respondents are willing to oblige. Therefore, only those available and willing at the time of contact are included.

A questionnaire serves as an instrument for collecting data. The instrument is face-validated by two professors of mass communication, who tested the content of the research instrument for clarity, variability, and accuracy. The experts ensure that the responses are original and impossible to trace with external criteria like behavioral realities and official records. To ensure reliability, a test-retest approach is used. The test-retest reliability study is conducted on 20 adult residents in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State, using twenty (20) copies of the questionnaire, and four (4) errors are observed. The Guttman scale of the coefficient of reproducibility is used to measure the reliability and consistency of the instrument. The details are as shown below:

$$1 - \frac{\text{total error}}{\text{total responses}} = 1 - \frac{4}{20} = 1 - 0.2 = 0.8.$$

The calculation yields 0.8 (80%), which is considered high. Data generated are presented using percentage count, mean, and standard deviation. Pearson correlation statistics is used to test the hypothesis.

Data Presentation

A total of 384 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to respondents in the selected state capitals. After distribution, 327 completed copies were collected over three months. Abakaliki accounted for 58 respondents (17.7%), Ikeja for 57 (17.4%), Makurdi for 56 (17.1%), Kaduna for 52 (15.9%), Port-Harcourt for 55 (16.8%), and Yola for 49 (15%). Of the 327 copies returned, 29 were incorrectly completed and thus invalidated. The questionnaire was completed by 298 respondents, resulting in a response rate of 78%. The data were examined with reference to the responses obtained from the 298 valid copies of the questionnaire, the research questions, and the hypotheses.

In Table 1 below, only 38.3% of the respondents reported having heard, watched, and read news reports exposing corruption cases in the Nigerian media since the inception of President Buhari's administration. In contrast, 163 respondents (54.7%) said no, while 7% were unsure. The mean and standard deviation values are 2.3121 and .59735, respectively

In the bid to investigate the extent to which media reports influence public perception of President Muhammadu Buhari's anti-corruption efforts, findings indicate that the majority of the respondents (65.4%) report that the media reports have not influenced public perception of the Anti-Corruption Crusade of President Buhari at all. Some still say that the influence is just to a little extent (3.7%), with a mean value of 1.6946 and standard deviation of .99360.

Regarding the extent to which media reports have elicited public support for President Muhammadu Buhari's anti-corruption efforts, the findings show that only a few of the respondents (10.7%) believe that media reports have elicited significant public support for the anti-corruption efforts. More than half (54%) disagree, saying there is no support at all. On whether the media reports have helped President Buhari's anti-corruption efforts, a majority of the respondents, 206 (69.1%), note that the media reports have helped, with mean and standard deviation values of 2.6577 and .54150.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Substantive Issues in Media Reports and Anti-Corruption Crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari.

Statements Response Options	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	Standard Deviation
Since the inception of the administration of President Buhari, have you watched, listened to or read news reports exposing corruption cases on the Nigerian media?	Not sure	21	7.0	
	No	163	54.7	2.3121
	Yes	114	38.3	.59735
	Total	298	100.0	
To what extent would you say that these reports have influenced your perception of the anti-corruption efforts of President Buhari?	No influence at all	195	65.4	
	Little extent	10	3.4	1.6946
	Significant extent	82	27.5	
	Very significant extent	11	3.7	
	Total	298	100.0	
To what extent have these reports elicited public support for the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari?	Not at all	161	54.0	
	Little extent	82	27.5	
	Significant extent	23	7.7	1.7517
	Very significant extent	32	10.7	.99430
	Total	298	100.0	
Do you think these media reports have helped the anti-corruption efforts of President Buhari?	I cannot say	10	3.4	
	No	82	27.5	2.6577
	Yes	206	69.1	.54150
	Total	298	100.0	

Note. N=298

Test of Hypotheses and Analysis

The first hypothesis aims to verify whether public exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country affects their perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari.

H1: Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari is dependent on their exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country.

H0: Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari is not dependent on their exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country.

Table 2. A Bivariate Analysis of Public Perception of Anti-Corruption Crusade and Exposure to Media Reports on Corruption.

Statements	Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari	Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari
Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.808**
	N	298
Public perception of the anti-corruption crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari	Pearson Correlation	.808**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	298

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above hypotheses are statistically tested using bivariate correlation to determine the relationship between the two variables. The results indicate significance at the 0.01 level. The correlation coefficient value is .808, with a P value of .000. Based on this result, the null hypothesis is rejected, while the alternate (H_1) hypothesis—which states that public perception of President Muhammadu Buhari’s anti-corruption crusade depends on exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country—is accepted.

The second hypothesis examines the relationship between the watchdog reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of President Buhari’s anti-corruption crusade.

H2: There is a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari.

H0: There is no significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari.

The above research hypotheses are subjected to inferential statistical analysis using bivariate correlation.

Table 3. Bivariate Correlation between Audience Exposure to Media Reports About Scourge of Corruption and Influence of Watchdog Reports on Public Perception of the Anti-Corruption Crusade of President Muhammadu Buhari.

Statements		The reports of Nigerian journalists	Progress of anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari
The reports of Nigerian journalists	Pearson Correlation	1	.479**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	298	298
Progress of anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari	Pearson Correlation	.479**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	298	298

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The result in Table 3 indicates that the correlation coefficient is .479** with a significant level of 0.01, suggesting that the news reports of Nigerian journalists significantly lead to the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari. Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) which denies the existence of a relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari. This shows that there is a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari.

Discussion of Findings

This study investigates the influence of journalists' watchdog role on public perception of President Buhari's anti-corruption crusade in Nigeria. The extent to which the public is exposed to media reports about scourge of corruption under the anti-graft crusade of the Buhari administration is first identified. The data show that only a few of them (38.3%) have heard, watched, or read news reports exposing corruption cases on Nigerian media since the inauguration of the Buhari administration. Given the wide reach and circulation of both online and offline media and prevalent high news consumption among residents in Nigeria (Isaac & Roper, 2021), this finding depicts the height of inadequacy of watchdog news in Nigerian media. In fact, the inadequacy of watchdog journalism has been identified by other researchers as a major challenge hindering the efforts of the media to consolidate democracy in Nigeria (Jatula, 2020). Low watchdog journalism has also been reported in other African countries, such as Uganda (African Centre for Media Excellence, 2021) and Cameroon (Ngomba, 2010), where journalists are reluctant to monitor government policies and programs.

One of the cardinal functions of journalists is to provide information and engagement with the citizenry for appropriate action toward national development, including issues related to corruption and abuse of power. Evidence abounds to show high correlations between watchdog journalism and some development-related variables such as urbanization, literacy, media participation, and political participation (Shah, 2019). Journalism has also been found to affect political knowledge (Oluwatosin, Olusoji, Olusola, & Popoola, 2020), political perceptions, and preferences (Kleinnijenhui, Hoof,

& Atteveldt, 2019). Watchdog journalists have brought about changes in political leadership (Macha, 2013) and reform in policy formulation and implementation (Nugent, 2022).

Therefore, the implication of low public exposure to watchdog news is that Nigerian journalists may not, currently, be able to carry out their civic duties under section 22 of the Nigerian constitution, which requires them to monitor those in positions of authority to ensure accountability to the public. However, the propensity for journalists to renounce their watchdog function for whatever reason undermines the core principles of the watchdog theory. If this situation persists, a further implication is that Nigerian journalists may lose credibility in the eyes of their audiences, corruption may persist unchecked, and ultimately, the task of nation building may come to a stop.

From this standpoint, the article examines the extent to which these media reports have influenced public perception of the anti-corruption efforts of the Buhari administration. The data indicate that the public perception of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration is very low. A majority (65.4%) of the respondents said that the few media reports on corruption had not influenced their perception of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration, to any extent at all.

The above view is further elaborated by the first hypothesis, which attempts to establish whether public perception of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration is dependent on their exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country. The bivariate correlation analysis of the hypotheses shows that public perception of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration is dependent on their exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country. The result of the bivariate correlation was significant at the 0.01 significance levels. The correlation coefficient value is .808, with the P value = .000. The null hypothesis (H_0), which denies the existence of a significant relationship between exposure to media reports in the country and public perception of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration, is, therefore, rejected, lending substantial support for acceptance of the alternative hypothesis H_1 .

The low public perceptions of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration have been identified by other researchers within the country. For instance, Akpan and Eyo (2018) note specifically that there is a negative impression of the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration by the Peoples Democratic Party faithfuls, the press, some major political stakeholders, and politicians, who consider the crusade to be a joke and not serious. It is similarly observed that the anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration are perceived as inadequate by the masses, and the way the campaign is being tackled is considered unacceptable (Amanah & Adeyeye, 2018).

It is important to note that the earliest works on human perception identified exposure to a stimulus (such as media messages) as a basic perceptual input. Later, social scientists and theorists premised on that springboard to theorize how the media shaped the views and perceptions of the audience. The media-effect paradigms that emerged, as a result, include the maximalist perspective, the minimalist approach, and the current stage of the conditionally powerful media. One of the major theories in the current conditionally powerful media stage is the agenda-setting theory, which describes how the importance attached to a particular issue is transferred from the news media to people in general. The

finding of this article is consistent with the agenda-setting theory, as it highlights the media's job in raising the significance of President Buhari's anti-graft efforts in the public's mind.

On whether these reports have elicited public support for Buhari's anti-corruption crusade, the results show that the majority of the respondents (54%) believe the little media coverage of corruption has not elicited any public support for the crusade. This finding aligns with Ukase and Audu (2015), who note that civil society has not lived up to expectations in the fight against corruption in Nigeria's fourth republic. Similarly, outside Africa, Hui (2017) observes that in China, public support for anti-corruption crackdowns has weakened because of perceived political biases. Against this backdrop, anti-graft bodies are cautioned that effective anti-corruption campaigns increase support for the government, but not if they are seen as a strategic move to purge political rivals (Dai, 2018).

There is no doubt that public perception and support are vital to the fight against corruption. The success or failure of anti-corruption crusades depends on people's trust in the government's commitment to effectively address corruption. This is why contemporary development theories underscore public ownership of development content and processes.

We also try to examine the nature of the influence these media reports have had on the anti-corruption efforts of the Buhari administration. A majority of the respondents (206; 69.1%) agree that the media reports have helped in the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari with the mean and standard deviation values of 2.6577 and .54150.

The second hypothesis dissected this view further by attempting to establish whether there is a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of President Buhari's anti-corruption crusade. The result of a bivariate correlation analysis indicates that the correlation coefficient is .479** with the significance level of 0.01, suggesting that the news reports of Nigerian journalists significantly lead to the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari. Based on this result, we have substantial statistical support to reject the null hypothesis (H_0) which denies the existence of a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari and accepts the alternative one. There is a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of the anti-corruption crusade of President Buhari.

This finding strengthens Omojola's (2010) observation that media performance or responsibility has a relationship with the level of corruption in a country. This finding is also consistent with the postulation that the media have a tangible role in curbing corruption, namely, investigating and exposing corrupt officials and office holders (Stapenhurst, 2000).

The responsibility of journalists to expose cases of corruption aligns with the watchdog theory of the press, which challenges media professionals to critique and evaluate the government and other institutions to prevent corruption and abuse of power. Thus, the findings of this study provide further empirical support for the propositions of the watchdog theory. The study establishes a significant relationship between the reports of Nigerian journalists and the progress of President Buhari's anti-

corruption crusade. This finding represents another significant step toward a better understanding of the influence of journalists' watchdog role on the contemporary anti-corruption movement.

Conclusion

The contributions of this article allow us to state that the current anti-graft efforts of the Buhari administration may not yield the desired result if the current level of audience exposure to media reports on corruption cases continues. This is because, as the findings indicate, public perception of anti-corruption movements significantly depends on exposure to media reports on corruption cases in the country. Unfortunately, as the study further shows, the extent to which the public is exposed to media reports on corruption cases under the Buhari administration is very low. Findings also show that the few media reports on corruption have not elicited public support for the anti-corruption crusade. The low audience exposure to media reports on corruption cases cannot in any way keep the public better informed about the scourge of corruption in the country. This can undermine the anti-corruption efforts of the Buhari administration. This shows that many Nigerian media have yet to prioritize watchdog journalism in their day-to-day work. Watchdog journalism involves the painstaking efforts of journalists going beyond their normal duties of informing, educating, and entertaining to investigating and exposing wrongdoing in the public interest, which perpetrators would otherwise prefer hidden. Thus, the low audience exposure to media reports on corruption, low public perception, and lack of public support for the Buhari administration's anti-corruption efforts all depict the Nigerian media's failure to effectively monitor and raise public awareness on corruption, especially in a manner that deters corrupt practices in the society.

Indeed, many scholars have long noted the inability of professional journalists to fulfill their societal function in some countries and suggest that journalism as a profession should be reinvented (Waisbord, 2013). Journalism must balance its techno-economic drive with civic adequacy to contribute meaningfully to citizenship and democracy. Professional journalism should focus on slower forms of journalism, aimed at verification, investigation, and problem-solving, as modern citizen journalism squares up with immediacy. This will enable journalism to increase public awareness and exposure to news about graft and wrongdoing. Thus, journalists and media owners in Nigeria must note that their jobs are not ordinary businesses that aim to increase profit alone. Rather, they bear a constitutional responsibility of upholding the accountability and responsibility of the government to the governed. Therefore, journalists and media owners must first consider themselves as public servants and, therefore, be fearless, committed to watchdog journalism, and truthful in their news reportage to save the voiceless community from embezzlement and other corrupt practices in the society.

There is a need for training and re-training many Nigerian journalists, not only in investigative reporting skills but also in the values and objectives of professional journalism in today's networked society, especially regarding reality/truth. To this end, journalism educators must play a crucial role in the training by invigorating the journalism curriculum to produce intellectual competence—not just in the technology and economics of journalism but also in its civic function. The civic function of journalism should focus on distilling, connecting, and supplying to society the best possible universal knowledge. This

way, professional journalism can rise above the challenge of immediacy to adequately provide watchdog news that promotes good governance and democracy.

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