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**Between fear and power : Kompas, Indonesia's most influential daily newspaper, 1965-2010**

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Chapter 6

**The Appearance of Neutrality:  
Kompas' Position in the Presidential  
Election 2014**

*"Whoever might win the election, Kompas had to win."*

*~Arif Subangun, Kompas Chief Editor, 18 March 2014*

2014 was an important year for Indonesian democracy. In this year, the country held its third direct presidential election since entering the new democratization era in 1998, after the fall of the New Order. Even though there were many names which appeared in the public debate, in the end the election featured two official candidates: Prabowo Subianto and Joko Widodo. Prabowo ran together with Hatta Rajasa (Hatta) as his Vice President. He was supported by five political parties: Gerindra, PAN, Golkar, PPP and PKS. Joko Widodo (Jokowi) ran with Jusuf Kalla as his Vice President, and was supported by four political parties: PDIP, Nasdem, PKB and PKPI.

Prabowo was a former military general who was also a founder of the Gerindra political party. Having run twice in the previous presidential elections, Prabowo was very popular among Indonesians voters. Appearing frequently on national Indonesian television over the past ten years, he had successfully constructed an image of a strong leader, highlighting his military training and achievements as the Commander of Elite Military Army (Kopasus). His eloquent stage performances as he delivered speeches during his various campaigns

consistently portrayed him as a decisive leader: the perfect antidote to the previous President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who was seen as doubtful and indecisive. Being the ex-son-in-law of President Suharto, Prabowo was seen as the perfect answer for most Indonesians, who missed the authoritarian figure of Suharto and his successful development of the Indonesian economy. In short, Prabowo was undoubtedly the strongest candidate to replace Yudhoyono. However, Jokowi came out of nowhere onto the Indonesian political scene and instantly caused a stir.

Jokowi was the antithesis of Prabowo. While Prabowo was born into the Indonesian elites (he is the son of Soemitro Djojohadikoesoemo, a famous Indonesian economist who held an important role during the New Order era), Jokowi was a modest, ordinary man who had started his career as a successful entrepreneur in Surakarta city. Jokowi embarked on his political career by twice being elected Mayor of Surakarta in the local elections of 2005 and 2010. His evident success in reforming Surakarta led him to be nominated as *Tempo's Leader of Choice* by *Tempo Weekly* (2008), and he received a *Changemakers Award* from *Republika Daily* (2010). At the international level, Jokowi was ranked third place in the World Mayor nomination by the World Mayor foundation headquartered in London in 2012. The rapid rise of Jokowi saw him win the 2012 election to be Governor of the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. But he did not stop there. His rocketing popularity and massive support from the Indonesian public allowed him to put himself forward as an alternative candidate in the ultimate election: the Indonesian presidential election of 2014.

The competition between these two popular presidential candidates created strong political polarization at every level of Indonesian society. As mentioned above, the political parties were grouped into two opposing camps: those who supported Prabowo and those who supported Jokowi. The competition equally polarized Indonesian citizens, as evident in the fierce debates that erupted on social media in the approaching weeks before the election. This reflection of the Indonesian public's sentiment on social media is significant, considering

that Indonesia has 69 million Facebook users, making it the fourth largest country of Facebook users after the United States, Brazil and India (Wall Street Journal, June 27, 2014); and the fifth largest amount of Twitter users worldwide, with 29 million users (Jakarta Post, August 29, 2014).

The Indonesian media, too, was also dragged into this polarization. The two main Indonesian television news broadcasters, *Metro TV* and *TV One*, took up opposing positions. *Metro TV*, which is owned by Surya Paloh, the founder of Nasdem Party - a supporting Political Party for Jokowi - was seen as strongly supportive of Jokowi throughout its coverage, whilst *TV One*, which was owned by the General Leader of the pro-Prabowo Golkar political party, Abu Rizal Bakria, demonstrated support for Prabowo in its coverage. Indonesian newspapers too, were seen as either being favorable towards Jokowi in their coverage, or more sympathetic to Prabowo. The preference of presidential candidate by each media groups was evident by the frequent appearance of one of the candidates in the news coverage, and was determined by the political affiliation of media the owner.

Adding to this potent partisan atmosphere, the 2014 elections were marred by disturbing rumors circulating among the Indonesian media and intellectuals about the dark past of one of the candidates: Prabowo. He was alleged to be involved in human rights abuses, including the abduction of pro-democracy student activists during the 1998 Indonesian student protest, as well as the massacre of civilians during a counter-insurgency operation in East Timor in 1983 (Klinken, April 27, 2014). This was the reason why *The Jakarta Post*, a media with no direct affiliation to any political party, decided to endorse Jokowi, as it was motivated by the need to prevent Prabowo from winning the election. This endorsement of Jokowi ran as follows:

*We are further perplexed at the nation's fleeting memory of past human rights crimes. A man who has admitted to abducting human rights activists, whether it be merely carrying out orders or of his own volition, has no place at the helm of the world's third-largest*

*democracy.... Rarely in an election has the choice been so definitive. Never before has a candidate ticked all the boxes on our negative checklist. And for this reason, we cannot do nothing....Therefore The Post feels obliged to openly declare its endorsement of the candidacy of Joko Widodo and Jusuf Kalla as president and vice president in the July 9 election. It is an endorsement we do not take lightly. (Jakarta Post, July 4, 2014)*

*Jakarta Post* was not the only newspaper that supported Jokowi. Goenawan Mohammad - the founder of *Tempo Weekly* as well as *Tempo* daily newspapers - openly declared his support for Jokowi, and believed that being neutral was not an obligation (*Tempo* daily, June 25, 2014). For the same reason, many Indonesian intellectuals also decided to convey their support for Jokowi. For instance, 333 intellectuals living in the Netherlands announced their support on social media with a campaign saying: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor" (Kompas.com, July 4, 2014). In short, due to the murky track record of Prabowo, who was seen as a threat to the future of human rights and democracy in Indonesia, some Indonesian media and intellectuals believed that preventing Prabowo from winning the election meant saving Indonesian democracy.

However, despite what was at stake with regard to the future of Indonesian democracy, and despite the media polarization, Kompas took an ambiguous position. Officially, the newspaper took a neutral position in its formal editorial policy. It opted not to side with either candidate. The newspaper endeavored to give equal space in its coverage to both pairs of candidates. It described both candidates mostly in a favorable tone, while avoiding being too critical in exposing the weaknesses of both candidates. Nevertheless, the overall tone of the coverage was more favorable towards Jokowi-JK, and most of the journalists personally supported Jokowi-JK. This showed in various ways. Some of the senior editors gave advice to the campaign, while some reporters even

attended the campaign, wearing t-shirts with a picture of Jokowi and JK on it. While individual journalists were mostly sympathetic to Jokowi, Kompas endeavored to appear to be neutral, in order to avoid conflict with whomever might win the election.

This chapter will discuss why Kompas took such an ambiguous stance. I will argue that this ambiguous neutrality was informed by economic considerations, as well as a long-standing tendency of Kompas not to anger ruling politicians. During the elections, Kompas could profit from receiving advertisements from both candidates, helping to ensure that Kompas would have a good working relation with the future president, whoever it was. In this sense, this chapter applies some of the arguments I developed in earlier chapters. As I argued in chapter 2, for Kompas, the maintenance of good relations with power holders was instrumental to securing economic gain in the form of financial support from the regime. Furthermore, as I argued in chapters 2 and 3, this neutrality was also informed by Kompas' longstanding preference to maintain a good relationship with power holders. It is, in other words, a heritage from Indonesia's authoritarian past that a newspaper like Kompas would prefer to avoid publishing critical articles that might be seen as favoring a particular candidate. These values, which developed primarily under the previous authoritarian eras, have become embodied as part of the habitus of Kompas journalists. This situation is surprisingly similar to the case in post-authoritarian Mexico, in which the legacy of the authoritarian past still influences the current state of its journalism.

To elaborate further on the argument above, this chapter will be divided into five sections. The first part will briefly discuss the concept of media neutrality in the literature of journalism. The second part will discuss Kompas' official editorial policy of neutrality. Next, it will discuss the individual position of most Kompas journalists who were in favor of Jokowi, in sharp contrast to their formal editorial policy. Meanwhile, the fourth part

will explain how this tension between the institutional policy and individual preference manifested in contesting definitions between journalists about the meaning of being neutral. The fifth part will explain the election coverage of the newspaper and suggest which notion of neutrality actually prevailed in the newsroom, and the last part will explain the underlying factors behind such an ambiguous position.

### 6.1 Neutrality as a Contested Theory in Journalism

In the literature on journalism, neutrality is broadly viewed in three different ways. The first group of scholars view neutrality as simply being equal and balanced. This definition usually emerges in discussions of media positions during general elections (Deloire, 2012; Hopmann et al., 2011; Marquez-Ramirez; 2012; Semetko, 2010; Tapsell, 2012 & 2017). Here, being neutral in the election means giving equal treatment to each candidate by allocating equal media coverage to both. In doing so, it is suggested that a political bias towards one of the candidates can be avoided:

*A journalist must devote equal and balanced attention to all parties and candidates...one way of ensuring impartiality is to provide equal amounts of coverage to each candidate....with each party's position balanced by the others. (Deloire, 2012: 19-20)*

Deloire elaborates further that in order to be neutral, a journalist has to avoid giving his personal judgment.

This simple definition of neutrality, however, has been challenged by the second group of scholars who define neutrality as not only giving balanced and equal coverage, but also providing as many different perspectives as possible about a certain story or issue (Hanitsch, 2006; Sambrook, 2012). In this regard, neutrality is not just seen as an output which is manifest in the news content, but also as input, which refers to the process of news production:



*Impartiality is to be distinguished from balance (the allocation of equal space to opposing views) and objectivity (by which journalist usually mean an effort to exclude subjective judgment). Impartiality involves no more than the attempt to regard different ideas, opinions, interests or individuals with detachment. (Sambrook, 2012: 5)*

In the quote above, Sambrook emphasizes that providing space for different ideas and opinions is at the heart of neutrality. He suggests that neutrality requires an effort from the media institution to be transparent about itself, laying bare its political affiliations, corporate interests and how it gathers its information. The ultimate aim of this neutrality as a process is to gain the trust of the readers and to give them a chance to evaluate the credibility of the information for themselves. However, despite defending the notion of neutrality, he also suggested that its implementation is not without exception. He believes in the notion of moral relativism, where neutrality might no longer apply to reporting groups, movements or individuals if they generate a threat to the survival of democracy, which is the basis from which neutrality can emerge. In the words of Sambrook: “you cannot be neutral in a situation of national or democratic survival”. (2012: 25)

Finally, there is the third view which does not see neutrality as one of the core values in journalism. One of the supporters of this notion is Patterson & Donsbach (1996), who argue that journalists’ political beliefs will always affect their news production. In line with this, Boudana (2016) believes that neutrality is a “delusive position”; instead of being neutral or impartial, she suggests that journalists turn to the concept of accuracy and fairness. Meanwhile, Jensen (1992) sees neutrality as an “illusion” which would be better replaced by the concept of objectivity, which is supporting a story with facts and evidence (1992:20). Confirming this notion of neutrality as illusionary, Kovach & Rosenstiel (2007) argued in their famous hand-book *The Elements of Journalism*, that neutrality is a myth in the mind of journalists and should be replaced by the concept of independency. In their words:

*It is worth restating the point to make it clear. Being impartial or neutral is not a core principal of journalism... Journalists must maintain independence from those they cover...It is this independence of spirit and mind, rather than neutrality, that journalists must keep in focus. (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007: 115-118)*

By the statement above, they wanted to convey that journalists should remain unattached and somewhat distant from the subjects they cover, and rather, simply aim to tell the truth to citizens, who are the sole group they owe loyalty to.

From the discussion above, it can be seen that there are three different theories about neutrality: seeing neutrality as being equal and offering spatial balance, seeing neutrality as offering multiple perspectives, and lastly, seeing neutrality as an elusive notion which should not be of journalistic value. While the first two theories still believe that the media should be neutral or impartial, the last theory believes that this notion should be replaced with other ideals such as independency, objectivity or fairness. As will be clear in the section that follows, *Kompas'* institutional policy is closer to the first definition above, which sees neutrality as synonymous with balance by giving equal space to both pairs of candidate during election.

## **6.2 Neutrality as Official Policy**

Tens of journalists gathered around a table at *Kompas* newsroom on that evening of March 18, 2014. The internal meeting of the political desk was being held. On one side of the table sat the head of *Kompas* political des, and some journalists in his division. However, unlike the previous meetings, the Chief Editor was also present, and it was he who gave the opening speech. Also present at the meeting were the Vice Chief Editor and some other senior journalists. They were discussing the newspaper's agenda for the most important political event in Indonesia in the last five years: the Indonesian presidential election, which would be held on the July 9, 2014 - less than four months away.

During the discussion, one of the reporters at the political desk raised a critical question:

*I have not done any content analysis of our coverage approaching this election; however, I felt that Kompas was supporting Jokowi. Was this, in fact, our editorial policy? (Dina, Kompas journalist, March 18, 2014)*

Her question was a reflection of the growing tension within *Kompas*, especially at the internal political desk, in which strong debates had been going on among the journalists about the newspaper's position. Outside the newsroom, there was strong suspicion, including from Prabowo himself, that *Kompas* had not acted neutrally and had sided with Jokowi.<sup>33</sup> In response to the question, the Chief Editor clearly answered that *Kompas'* editorial position was neutral:

*So, we emphasize here that we did not take sides, because our position is neutral. We hold our independence, our neutrality, and our integrity by not endorsing any candidate. Our main focus is, still, our journalistic values. (Arif Subangun, Kompas' Chief Editor, March 18, 2014).*

Therefore, it can be seen that Arif interpreted neutrality as not taking the side of either candidate.

This statement that *Kompas'* position was neutral was also clearly declared in the editorial column of the newspaper on July 8, 2014 as follows:

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<sup>33</sup> On a youtube channel dated August 4, 2015 by *Kompas TV*, there was a video showing how Prabowo had refused to be interviewed by a journalist from *Kompas TV*, as he believed that all the media belonging to the *Kompas Group* had been biased ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UcAc\\_P0wrY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UcAc_P0wrY)). In his words: "*Kompas* group was not fair and not just to me." Even though this video was only uploaded around a year later, the event itself took place around the election period in July 2014.

*It has never happened before that the public has been so enthusiastic in a legislative election as this 2014 one, and also for the presidential election next Wednesday. With only two pairs of presidential and vice presidential candidates, the competition could escalate into a conflict between two groups, and the mass media (print, electronic and digital) is right in the middle of this turbulence. The mass media, as part of society, is in a very vulnerable position, as if walking on wot ogal-agil. The position and identity of the mass media, which should be free from practical political interest, is on trial. (Kompas editorial column, July 8, 2014)*

The editorial column above was written by the *Kompas* Vice Director, who later told me that the overall purpose of that editorial had been to emphasize *Kompas*' neutrality:

*Wot ogal-agil, a Javanese term for a narrow and unsteady bridge, usually made of a single piece of bamboo to cross a river, and usually found in a village. The bamboo is so small and weak that it shakes as we walk on it. Therefore, it is very important to walk slowly and carefully to keep our balance, as a failure to do so would mean we fall into the river below, where many wild crocodiles wait for us... So, through this editorial, we want to convey the message that we are neutral... We also would like to imply that even if in our hearts we hope for Jokowi, as an institution we are neutral. (Sularto, Vice General Director of Kompas, July 8, 2014)*

From the quotation above, it can be seen that besides providing balanced reporting, *Kompas* also further defines neutrality as not taking sides with any candidate. However, the interview also suggests that *Kompas*' Vice Editor was aware that there was tension between the institutional position of the newspaper and the individual desires of most journalists, who supported Jokowi. To what extent did *Kompas* journalists support Jokowi? The next section will address this question.

### 6.3 Individual Positions of the Journalists: Mostly in Favor of Jokowi-JK

Unlike its institutional policy to be neutral, *Kompas* journalists were mostly in favor of Jokowi-JK. These individual political preferences were manifested in various ways from simply giving moral support to the candidates, to giving political advice to the Jokowi-JK campaign, and attending the campaigns themselves. This section will elaborate further on these findings.

The first and most surprising show of support from journalists at the newspaper was that coming from Jakob Oetama. Whilst I was working in the newsroom, there was a rumor among the journalists on the third floor that an important political event was happening on the sixth floor of the *Kompas* building. It was on this floor that Jakob's office was located. This important political event was a visit from the presidential candidate, Jokowi, to ask Jakob for his political support. The meeting was only attended by a handful of elites in the newsroom. However, in March 2014, a picture was circulated among the journalists on the third floor in which they could see Jakob Oetama standing next to Jokowi, who was then still a candidate running for the presidency:

**Picture 1**

Jokowi's Visit to *Kompas* Newsroom



Jakob Oetama, number three from the right, a man with grey hair standing next to Jokowi, who is the man standing in the center wearing a long brown batik shirt, March 2014, four months before the presidential election on 9 July.

In the picture above, besides Jakob himself, other *Kompas* elites such as Sularto, the Vice Director, are also present (the man with the brown shirt, standing first from the right); Arif Subangun, the Chief Editor (in a white shirt standing to the far left); as well as D Oscar, a senior journalist (wearing a red shirt, standing next to Jokowi). When I confronted some of the elites with this picture, they were reluctant to admit that it was, in fact, evidence of support for Jokowi. Some of them explained to me that *Kompas* would have welcomed any candidate who wished to pay a visit to their office. Therefore, they believed the picture did not necessarily mean that the newspaper was supporting Jokowi (personal interview with *Kompas* journalist, March 20, 2014). However, despite the early denial of some journalists, the meaning of the picture was made clear

by the then Vice Chief Editor. In a casual conversation with him one day after the presidential election was over, he suggested that the reason why Prabowo lost was because he had not paid a visit to Jakob. In his words: “Prabowo lost because he did not meet Pak Jakob” (Personal communication, July 10, 2014). This means that Jokowi’s visit and Prabowo’s failure to pay a visit made *Kompas* inclined to believe it could rely more on Jokowi than Prabowo. Therefore, they decided to support him.

The picture above fits well with the fact that Jakob also personally supported the vice presidential candidate of Jokowi, Jusuf Kalla (JK). While the picture above did not contain explicit words of support for Jokowi from Jakob, it was understood that Jakob supported JK. At an editorial meeting in early March 2014, I saw evidence of this as Jakob endorsed JK. He suggested that JK should become a presidential candidate, or at the least, be paired as Jokowi’s vice presidential candidate. In Jakob’s view, JK, who was a senior politician from the Golkar Party and whom he had known personally, would make a better presidential candidate than Jokowi. One of the senior journalists confirmed that Jakob had personally known Jusuf Kalla, who had often been invited to *Kompas* for a series of discussions on the Indonesian economy in the 1990s. In the words of Sularto:

*In the beginning Mr. Jakob said that Jokowi was still untested (belum teruji) ...(to the contrary) JK was good when he acted as a vice president in the era of SBY (Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono). He could even mask the weakness of SBY.... Mr. Jakob believes this person is professional. He has known JK for a long time through a series of discussion held by Kompas. JK has proved successful as an entrepreneur and when he got into politics in the Golkar party, it was a good chance for him, because to become a leader one has to join a political party. (Sularto, Vice General Director of Kompas, personal communication, July 8, 2014)*

In his message congratulating the newspaper on its golden anniversary, Jusuf Kalla confirmed the statement of Sularto above, by suggesting that he was often invited to the paper and appeared in the coverage of the daily in that period (Jusuf Kalla, *Kompas*, June 28, 2015). It was for this reason that during Jakob's meeting with Megawati, the Chairman of the PDIP party, which won the parliamentary election on April 9, Jakob suggested Jusuf Kalla be selected as a candidate for vice chief president endorsed by PDIP and paired with Jokowi.<sup>34</sup> To this support of Jusuf Kalla by Jakob, the Director of Communication at *Kompas*, Nugroho F Yudho, explained that while Jakob accepted and supported all politicians who came to him, this support was not translated into *Kompas'* editorial policy., which remained neutral.

Personal support also came from the editorial boards of the newspaper where *Kompas'* Chief Editor, as well as the Vice Chief Editor, occasionally met Jokowi to offer personal advice for his campaign. For instance, on the day when the legislative election took place, on April 9, the Chief Editor shared a story with other journalists in the newsroom. Speaking almost in a whisper, as if there were Prabowo supporters in the newsroom, Arif said:

*Yesterday I met Jokowi. He told me how surprised he was by the political support shown for him, as he did not feel like a rich person, nor a particularly charming man... he also asked for our input, which we happily provided. (Arif Subangun, April 9, 2014)*

It is clear, therefore, that Arif had supported Jokowi by giving him political advice on how to win the election.

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<sup>34</sup> Tempo Weekly, March 17-23, 2014, "Drama Jokowi, Di balik penetapan Gubernur DKI sebagai calon presiden dari PDI Perjuangan"; Tempo Weekly, April 21-27, 2014, "Kutak-Katik Calon Pendamping"; Tempo.co, May 19, 2014, Perjalanan JK Sampai Mendampingi Jokowi.



It is noteworthy, however, that Arif himself was not a member of Jokowi's campaigning team. In line with Arif, *Kompas'* Vice Chief Editor Randu Rahardjo also demonstrated his support for Jokowi. In a casual conversation in the newsroom, he shared his experience with other journalists:

*Sometimes I want to write a book about what goes on behind the scenes of Kompas. When Jokowi visited us yesterday, he looked panicked. It was because Prabowo was closing in (in the polls). Sadly, I don't have the heart to write such a book. (Randu Rahardjo, July 10, 2014)*

In the quote above, Randu is showing his colleagues that he had been of much assistance to Jokowi, so much so that he could write an entire book about it.

These statements showing support for Jokowi by members of *Kompas* elites were further confirmed by one of the Jokowi's campaign managers, Priyadi Subangkit, who went on to serve as President Jokowi's Special Staff in Political Communication. He explained that in the period leading up to the vote, on July 9, polls by several survey institutes showed support for Prabowo and Jokowi to be closely tied. *Kompas* was one of the institutions which had conducted such a survey. In response to this situation, Priyadi visited *Kompas* and asked for further details of the survey in order to identify where Jokowi was losing support, and how to address this. Based on this data from *Kompas*, he designed a campaigning strategy which targeted this problem (Interview with Priyadi Subangkit, September 5, 2016).

The Head of the Political Desk, Asep Setiawan, also supported Jokowi, though not necessarily because he liked him, but more because he believed that if Prabowo won the election, it would pose a danger for Indonesian democracy. So strongly did he hold this view that he threatened to resign from his job as a journalist if Prabowo won the election:

*I feel that even now, when the (political) situation is relatively free, Kompas is not yet able to tell the truth straightforwardly to the public. It will be worse if Prabowo became President. We could sink even lower. (Asep Setiawan, personal interview, October 5, 2014)*

Asep went further by suggesting that in his view most *Kompas* journalists were in favor of Jokowi, not because they believed in Jokowi himself, but because they shared the desire to prevent Prabowo from winning the election and thereby secure the future of Indonesian democracy. Despite these strong assertions, as will be discussed later, Asep refused to publish any critical coverage of Prabowo which would indicate that the newspaper favored Jokowi-JK.

As well as from the elites, support for Jokowi was also reflected in the newsroom. In the build up to the election, I observed a sense of euphoria in the air. Every single day, journalists exchanged the latest political gossip and intrigues, and jokes and laughter about the election colored every editorial meeting. What was interesting was despite *Kompas'* institutional policy to be neutral, it was clear that most journalists in the newsroom displayed strong support for Jokowi. As stated in the words of the Managing Editor of the newspaper:

*In one meeting, I was criticizing Jokowi. However, I was soon attacked by members of the editorial boards, so I quietened down immediately. In the editorial meetings, it seems it is only Pak Jakob (the owner of Kompas) who has the audacity and authority to criticize Jokowi. (Jimmy Laluna, Managing Editor, April 9, 2014)*

The above statement illustrates how since the majority of *Kompas* journalists supported Jokowi, the minority who supported Prabowo felt reluctant to voice any criticism of Jokowi. And indeed, it was only a very small minority who were rumored to support Prabowo, such as the journalist Ninuk Mardiana Pambudy, who was a member of the *Kompas* editorial board. Her support of Prabowo was due to the fact that her

husband was one of the elites in the Gerindra Party, of which Prabowo acted as the chairman. But apart from her, it was hard to find journalists who obviously displayed their support for Prabowo. It is for this reason that only the *Kompas* owner, having the most authority to express his opinion, could freely criticize Jokowi. Indeed, as explained above, Jakob initially favored JK to be the presidential candidate instead of Jokowi.

Considering the dynamics within the newsroom, it was not a big surprise that many *Kompas* journalists attended the last day of Jokowi's campaign on July 5, at the Gelora Bung Karno stadium in Jakarta, together with tens of thousands of Indonesians. The rally became the headline of *Kompas* the next day, on July 6, 2014. In the words of one of the senior editors:

*The night before the event in the GBK (Jokowi's last rally), we handed out Jokowi campaign t-shirts on the Kompas third floor. There were hundreds of t-shirts. People wore them and we took pictures in the middle of the newsroom. The passion and preference for Jokowi **which had been kept hidden** so far, was finally expressed. We then joined the rally the next day. (Suranto, Kompas Senior Editor, July 10, 2014, emphasis added by the author)*

Confirming the statement of the *Kompas* editor above, the following picture depicting the event was circulated among the journalists:

**Picture 2**  
Journalists Support for Jokowi



*Kompas* journalists wearing t-shirts with the pictures of the presidential candidates, Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla, and making the gesture of the number 2 with their fingers.

The picture above was taken in the newsroom of *Kompas*, on Friday, July 4, the evening before Jokowi's final rally at the Gelora Bung Karno stadium. It can clearly be seen that most *Kompas* journalists were in favor of a Jokowi-JK win.

Therefore, the difference between the newsroom's formal policy and the individual preferences of the journalists forced them to restrain themselves from any public expression of their political preference. They did this in several ways, such as keeping any personal communication they might have had with Jokowi away from public attention, ensuring their activities on social media were free of any indications of political support, as well as not involving themselves as official members of Jokowi's campaigning team, despite some journalists giving advice to his campaign. An example of such control was the photograph of Jokowi's visit to *Kompas* as mentioned earlier, when D Oscar, one of the journalists who appears in the picture, made it his profile picture on his blackberry application. But a few hours after posting, he deleted it due to

protests from other journalists who feared the picture, which would be seen by all his contacts, would be interpreted as *Kompas*' support for Jokowi.

How was this tension between the newspaper's institutional policy of neutrality, on the one hand, and the journalists' individual positions as citizens who have the right to support a candidate on the other, to be reconciled, whilst remaining professional? To be more specific, how did the journalists caught up in this dilemma, define the concept of neutrality amid the political competition between the running candidates during the presidential election? In the section that follows, it will be explained that just like there are contested theories about neutrality in journalism, there is also a contested definition of neutrality in the *Kompas* newsroom among the journalists.

#### 6.4 Defining Neutrality Differently

Interviewing various groups of *Kompas* journalists, I found that they all agreed with the notion to be neutral; however, each of them defined neutrality differently. These differences were influenced to some extent by their position on the editorial board: I found that the higher the position of the journalist, the more similarly they defined neutrality as "giving the same space to the two opposing candidates". On the contrary, the lower the journalists were hierarchically, the more they struggled to define the concept. For example, the Chief Editor of *Kompas*, Arif Subangun, defined neutrality as follows:

*So perhaps we need to clearly state here that we did not take sides with either of the candidates... that is, in terms of institution... In terms of culture, taking sides does not fit with our culture... To be honest, my priority is our safety. We gave exactly the same centimeter, same number of pages and also same column length [to each candidate]... I don't care if people see me as too technical. (Subangun, Chief Editor, March 18, 2014)*

Arif's statement shows that 'neutral' was measured both qualitatively and quantitatively: the coverage should not be in favor of any one candidate, while equal space has to be dedicated to both candidates.

However, this very idealistic notion of neutrality was hard to implement in the day-to-day, news making practice. Suhartono, one of the Senior Editors at the political desk, shared his view on this:

*I personally still cover both candidates, but differentiate the tone, for instance in the case of a photo. There is a photo of Prabowo getting down from his landed helicopter, while alongside it, a photo of Jokowi in the rice fields. The photo of Jokowi was good. But I did not prohibit any photo coverage of Prabowo, for instance with a reason that it could damage Prabowo's image. In fact, Prabowo is like that in real life. So we keep covering both but with different tones. (Suhartono, Senior Editor, October 7, 2014)*

The above statement shows that even though quantitatively, it might be possible to give the same space to both candidates, qualitatively it is impossible to provide an equally neutral tone. In the case above, Suhartono could not control the implication of any coverage being unfavorable for Prabowo. The picture in question shows Prabowo getting down from his helicopter, which could be interpreted as being elitist and distanced from common Indonesian people (the picture will be displayed and elaborated on in the next section). Thus, Suhartono defined neutrality as merely giving the same space in quantitative terms.

Jimmy Laluna, whose position was Chief Executive Editor of *Kompas*, shared the same view as Suhartono. He argued that in practice, even though *Kompas* gave the same space to both candidates in its coverage, it was evident from the newspaper's tone who was the favored candidate. He explains: "Neutral is giving chances for everyone to speak. But in practice, sometimes we used other people's mouths to articulate our preference." (Jimmy Laluna, July 10, 2014).

However, differing from all these editors, Asep Setiawan, the Head of the Political Desk who was in charge of editing the day-to-day works of all reporters in the political division, argues that it is practically impossible to give even the same space in quantitative terms or the same tone in qualitative terms. The reason for this is not technical, he claims, but ideological. He describes:

*When we talk about the presidential election, it is clear that we are talking about one person. And I told our friends (the reporters), that for me, it was impossible to score these candidates 50:50. The fact was, that one of these candidates (Prabowo) had defects against the law, while the other candidate didn't... So we have to score 60:40 in favor of Jokowi, or even 70:30. For me, it was wrong to give the same starting score 0-0 for both candidates... There were indeed some friends at the political desk who initially disagreed with this. But after I explained to them, they understood. (Setiawan, Head of the Political Desk, October 5, 2014)*

Asep further explained that as journalists, they were all well aware of the fact that Prabowo was involved in serious violations of human rights, including the kidnapping of university student activists during the 1998 Indonesian riots when he was on duty as the Commander General of the Special Military army (Kopassus), and which led to the resignation of Suharto. For him, this was evident as legal evidence of the incidents had been released by the Indonesian National Commission of Human Rights (KOMNASHAM), and remained unchallenged by Prabowo himself.

Taking a more cynical stance, Edna, one of the reporters at the political desk, echoed Sutta, but furthermore doubted whether the policy of neutrality was even implemented by *Kompas* at all. She said:

*I think it is nonsense that we were neutral during the presidential election. Even now, half a year after the election, most people in the newsroom are still in favor of Jokowi. What I did as a reporter was to*

*keep reporting what I believed as having news value, then I left it to the editors to decide whether my work was published or not. (Dina, February 25, 2015)*

From these above statements, it is clear that the definition of neutrality differed among *Kompas* journalists. While the editorial elites believed in the idea of neutrality as being a spatial, quantitative balance which was achieved, the junior editors and the ordinary reporters suggest that such balance is impossible to achieve, and therefore that journalists should simply convey the truth regardless of the consequences. Their position is closer to the concept of independency and objectivity. The question then is: which definition prevails at the newspaper, as manifested in its content?

### **6.5 Kompas' Actual Coverage: Equal in Space, Taking Sides in Tone**

In order to study the content of the newspaper, a qualitative content analysis was conducted of the newspaper coverage during the period of the presidential campaign. This research did a census (total sampling) of all *Kompas'* coverage during the presidential campaign. According to the regulation from the Indonesian Electoral Commission (KPU) as stipulated in the Decision of KPU Number 457/2014, the period of the campaign actually started from June 4 and ended on July 5, or four days before the election day on July 9. However, considering that the news coverage right until the election day could still influence the decision of voters, this research will conduct a content analysis starting from June 4 to July 9, 2014. This period was chosen as it was when both candidates poured all of their financial resources into the final round before voters came to the ballot box. Based on the articles from this period, it was found that there were 190 articles and 89 photos/pictures covering the candidates.

Every article and every photo/group of photos that appeared in the newspaper was selected as a unit of analysis to examine the tone of the coverage, and three categories of tone were determined: favorable, unfavorable or neutral.



The tone of the coverage was classified as favorable if an article covered a candidate or pair of candidates in a positive way that encouraged support from readers. This could range from describing a candidate as having a positive track record as a public official to possessing the positive quality of a leader who is close to the people ('down to earth' or *merakyat*). Meanwhile, the tone of coverage was interpreted as unfavorable if it portrayed a candidate or a pair of presidential candidates in a negative light, encouraging the reader not to vote for him. This ranged from describing a candidate as a weak leader, corrupt, or a criminal who had committed violations of human rights. Finally, the tone of coverage was determined as neutral when it covered a candidate or pairs of candidate in neither a positive or negative way.

In the case of *Kompas*, sometimes an article had a positive tone at the beginning (article lead) and yet a negative tone in the last paragraph, or vice versa. When such a case happened, the interpretation was made based on the title and lead of the article. This is based on the assumption that the title is the first sentence read by the newspaper readers, and as it is written in a bigger font, it is more noticeable to the readers. In addition, news is structured in a pyramidal form in which the more important details are revealed first. Therefore, the title and lead more accurately reflects the position of the newspaper. It is important to note that despite this explanation of my methodology, my researcher's subjectivity might influence my interpretation of the tone. Nevertheless, this interpretation is always based firmly on the data.

Based on the qualitative content analysis of the *Kompas* coverage from June 4 until July 9 2014, it is revealed that *Kompas* managed to keep a relative balance in terms of space given to both candidates; however, the tone of the coverage was in favor of the Jokowi-JK candidate pair. The balance in terms of space can be seen in the number of articles covering both candidates in table 1 below<sup>35</sup>:

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<sup>35</sup> For coding, see tables 1-2, appendix 3.

**Table 1**  
Number of Article Coverage

<b>Pair of candidates</b>	<b>Amount of Coverage</b>
(1). Prabowo – Hatta	52 (27.3%)
(2). Jokowi – JK	62 (32.6%)
Combination	76 (40%)
Total	190 (99.9%)

From table 1 above, it can be seen that there were 190 articles covering both candidates in total. These 190 articles appeared in many forms: news articles, features, political columns, opinion pieces, editorials, and ‘corner’ (a satirical piece which was placed in the corner of the opinion column of *Kompas*). Out of these 190 articles, most of them (40%) cover both Prabowo and Jokowi in the same articles. Meanwhile, there are 62 articles (32.6%) covering the Jokowi - Jusuf Kalla pair, focusing on either one or both of them in the same article. Slightly fewer than this, 52 (27.3%) of articles, focus on either one or both of the Prabowo - Hatta Rajasa pair. Overall, the coverage of both pairs of candidates can be seen to be fairly balanced in terms of number of articles.

However, a slightly different result is found in terms of article orientation, in which the newspaper is more favorable to pairs of candidate number 2 (Jokowi – Jusuf Kalla), as can be seen in table 2 below:

**Table 2**  
Orientation of Article Coverage

Pair of candidates	Orientation
(1). Favorable to Prabowo – Hatta	40 (21.0%)
<b>(1). Unfavorable to Prabowo – Hatta</b>	12 (6.3%)
(2). Favorable to Jokowi-JK	78 (41.0%)
<b>(2). Unfavorable to Jokowi - JK</b>	-
Neutral for both candidates in coverage combining both pairs	60 (31.5%)
Total	190 (99.8%)

The table above shows that the tone of the articles are predominately favorable to both candidates (62%), or neutral (31.5%). In sharp contrast, only 6.3% of articles were negative in tone towards Prabowo-Hatta, which reflects the tendency of the newspaper to avoid critical reporting of both candidates. However, when both pairs of candidates are compared, the tone of the articles which are positive about Jokowi-JK is 41%, covering either Jokowi, Jusuf Kalla, or both of them in the same article, thereby encouraging readers to vote for them. Meanwhile, only 21% of articles portray either Prabowo or Hatta, or both of them, in a positive light.

One of the articles in favor of Jokowi-JK can be seen in the article entitled “*It’s Time For The People To Give Their Voice*” as follows:

*I am not a king//I am just an ordinary person//who is always made to be a doormat for the king...”. This song which contains satirical lyrics and is entitled “King”, was sung by the band Rif in the concert “Greeting of the Two Fingers” in the Desire of Bung Karno Stadium (GBK), Jakarta, on Saturday 5 July. This concert involved about 200 musicians who supported the candidacy of Joko Widodo and Jusuf Kalla. (Kompas, July 6, 2014)*

The article above covered a story during the campaign of Jokowi and Jusuf, and framed them as the representation of the people through its title as well as its story. The main message was to inspire and compel the crowd gathered there in the stadium to vote for Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla in the election, which was to take place only three days after the concert, and encourage them not to be complacent. The lyrics fit with the narrative constructed by Jokowi's campaigning team, who consistently portrayed him as the first presidential candidate to come from humble origins, and who could therefore relate to the Indonesian people. One of their popular slogans was: "Jokowi Is Us (*Jokowi Adalah Kita*)."

Meanwhile, one of the articles in favor of Prabowo can be seen in an article entitled "Seven Chop Steaks For Prabowo", as follows:

*Arrive in Bandung as twilight approached, Prabowo Subianto directly went to visit the Chop Steak and Curry Restaurant of HM Harris. It looks like Prabowo was treated by Aburizal Bakri. "I asked him to come here. He said yes. So we came here" Said Aburizal. (Kompas, June 5, 2014)*

The paragraph above illustrates the close friendship between Prabowo and the Chairman of the Golkar Party, Aburizal Bakri, who supported him as a presidential candidate, and this close relationship is shown by the two of them having dinner together in a restaurant.

However, 6.3% of the articles analyzed covered Prabowo-Hatta Rajasa in an unfavorable tone, which might have discouraged readers from voting for them. One such example of this is in the article entitled "Prabowo's Team Was Not Worried", as follows:

*The campaigning team of candidates Prabowo-Subianto was not worried about the circulation of a document, a letter of notice (surat keputusan) written by former Indonesian President BJ Habibie in 1998, about the dismissal of Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto as well as a letter of recommendation by the Soldier Ethical Board in 1998. They believed it wouldn't disturb the electability of their candidate for the presidential election on 9 July 2014. (Kompas, June 12, 2014)*

This article was reporting the story of two letters that were circulated around that period, about the decision from President BJ Habibie who was then the superior of Prabowo, as well as a letter from the Soldier Ethical Board, both of which confirmed the dismissal of Prabowo from the army as he was proven guilty of violating the ethical conduct of the military corps. This violation could not be separated from the widespread rumors among Indonesians of Prabowo's involvement in the activist abduction of 1998. Whether the rumors carried by the letters were true or false, and despite the headline of the article stating that Prabowo's team were not worried about this rumor, it is clear that the story was unfavorable towards Prabowo's candidacy.

Besides analyzing written articles, this study also examined the content of the pictures, photos, diagrams, and cartoons which covered the pair of candidates during the period of the presidential campaign. From the data collection, it was again found that *Kompas* had given a relatively equal space to both pair of candidates; but that the overall tone was in favor of Jokowi – Jusuf Kalla. The equal space for both pairs of candidate can be seen in table 3 below<sup>36</sup>:

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<sup>36</sup> For coding, see tables 3-4, appendix 3.

**Table 3**  
Amount of Picture Coverage

Pair of Candidates	Amount of Coverage
(1). Prabowo – Hatta	33 (37.5%)
(2). Jokowi – JK	31 (35.2%)
Combination	24 (27.2%)
Total	88 (99.9%)

The table above shows that the amount of coverage given to Prabowo-Hatta (37.5%) is relatively equal to Jokowi-JK (35.2%). Furthermore, just like with the analysis of articles, the tone of most of the pictures are favorable or neutral towards both candidates, as shown in table 4 below:

**Table 4**  
Picture Orientation

Pair of Candidate	Orientation
(1). Favorable to Prabowo – Hatta	30 (34.0%)
<b>(1). Unfavorable to Prabowo – Hatta</b>	3 (3.4%)
(2). Favorable to Jokowi-JK	38 (43.1%)
<b>(2). Unfavorable to Jokowi - JK</b>	-
Neutral for both candidates	17 (19.3%)
Total	88 (99,8%)

From table 4, we can see that 77.1% of articles were favorable in tone, 19.3% were neutral and **only** 3.4% were unfavorable; but the total unfavorable coverage was directed at Prabowo-Hatta.

Just as with the articles, when the statistics for both pairs of candidates is compared, a higher quantity of pictures are relatively in favor of Jokowi – JK (43.1%), whilst those favorable towards Prabowo-Hatta is slightly lower at 34%. There is no unfavorable coverage of Jokowi-JK.

An example of photos favorable to Jokowi, as well as photos that were unfavorable to Prabowo, can be found in the coverage on the same day: June 14, 2015, in a piece that serves to illustrate the contrasting campaigning styles of the candidates, with a clear promotion of Jokowi:

**Picture 3**

The Contrasting Campaigning Style of Both Candidates



Prabowo Meets The People  
Kompas, Wednesday, 14 June 2014, page 4



Jokowi Greets Fishermen and Farmers  
Kompas, Wednesday, 14 June 2014, page 5

From picture 1 it can be seen that *Kompas'* coverage displayed pictures of both candidates on the same day. While the picture of candidate number 1, Prabowo, appeared on page 4 (on the left), candidate number 2. Jokowi, appeared on page 5 (on the right). From both pictures, we can see a contrasting theme framed by the newspaper. While both pictures cover the activities of each candidate meeting the Indonesian people, Prabowo is framed as an elite

who uses a helicopter in order to meet his people, while Jokowi is framed as a humble leader (*merakyat*) who is comfortable in the rice fields. Despite the article on Prabowo being entitled “*Prabowo Meets the People*”, the picture only shows him being welcomed by his assistants on arrival. There is no picture of the common people in the frame. This contrasts with the picture of Jokowi, which is entitled “*Jokowi Greets Fishermen and Farmers*”, where we can see him shaking the hands of the farmers directly. If selecting a president is about finding the right man who is truly committed to the people, then the picture of Jokowi is surely more convincing. Thus, these pictures show that *Kompas* was more in favor of Jokowi in its tone. In fact, whilst I was in the newsroom, one of the editors told me that Prabowo’s campaigning team had come to the newsroom to complain about the picture, pointing out that there were many pictures of Prabowo among the crowds or people in the street, so why did *Kompas* publish such a picture? (Asep Setiawan, personal interview, July 18, 2014).

In summary, this section has provided evidence that *Kompas*’ coverage has mainly reflected the definition of neutrality to mean not taking sides and covering both candidates in a balanced manner by providing equal space for both of them. However, there is an ambiguity, as despite the neutrality in terms of space, the tone of the coverage was less neutral. While most of the coverage portrayed both candidates in a positive or neutral tone, when the two were compared it was found that the number that favored Jokowi-JK was higher than Prabowo-Hatta. How can this ambiguous neutrality be explained?

## **6.6 Underlying Factors Behind Kompas’ Ambiguous Position**

Based on in-depth interviews as well as on-site observations, I found that the underlying reason for the neutral position taken by the newspaper corresponds with the reason why it conducted its watchdog function in a polite way, as proposed in chapter 5. The combination of cultural as well as political economy factors are intertwined, and together, they shape the newspaper’s position.



First of all, by not siding with either candidate, the newspaper aimed to ensure it would remain close to whoever might win the election. As explained in previous chapters, this close and congenial relationship with the power holders was crucial to avoid being banned during the authoritarian period (Chapter 2), while in the current democratization era, this close relationship was important in securing political protection against attacks from conservative, anti-Catholic groups (Chapter 4). The newspaper's aim to remain close with the power holders by staying neutral can be seen in the statement of Arif Subangun, the Chief Editor of the paper: "Politics is dynamic. If now we support Jokowi...we hold on to this, but then it breaks...don't you think it's scary? ...Whoever might win, *Kompas* had to win." (Arif Subangun, March 18, 2014). The line above suggested that the newspaper maneuvers to always be on the side of the winner, which might not have been possible if they explicitly supported one candidate over the other. Arif fears that if the candidate they supported lost the election, they would end up being the enemy of the power holder. This view was confirmed by Sularto, the Vice Director of the newspaper: "If *Kompas* explicitly declared support for Jokowi, we would obviously make an enemy of the other. You are my enemy's media, just like *Metro TV* (who explicitly endorsed Jokowi)... they (Prabowo) would use us as their shooting target." (Sularto, *Kompas* Vice Director, July 8, 2014)

Secondly, the position to be neutral reflects the economic interest of the newspaper, both to maintain its readership, whom they believe were politically divided over the two candidates, as well as to maximize the chance of receiving advertising revenue from both candidates. The first factor to maintain its readership can be seen by these words of Sularto: "I think it will be unfair for those who don't like Jokowi. The readers of *Jakarta Post* are not the only followers of Jokowi. I think they are being too pragmatic [in endorsing Jokowi]." (Sularto, *Kompas* Vice Director, July 8, 2014). In the lines above, Sularto questions the position of *The Jakarta Post* who endorsed Jokowi. In his view, *The Post* did not consider that their readers were politically divided. By

suggesting this, he is implying that maintaining their readership was one of the underlying factors contributing to *Kompas'* neutrality.

Meanwhile, the newspaper also had an economic interest to maximize its opportunity for gaining advertising revenue from both candidates, and by staying neutral, or at least, not explicitly declaring its position during the election, it could achieve this. From all of this coverage from June 4 to July 9, it was found that indeed, both pairs of candidates advertised their campaigns in the newspaper. While the first pair of presidential candidates spent around 1 billion rupiahs (66,666 euros) to advertise in the daily, Jokowi and Jusuf Kalla spent more than six billion rupiahs (416,898 euros) on advertising in the paper (Appendix 4).

There is, indeed, no direct evidence that the advertising revenue has influenced the journalists in their coverage on the election. However, the advertising as well as considerations of the market did influence journalists at the elite level, such as stated by the Vice Director of *Kompas* above. Furthermore, Randu Rahardjo, the Vice Chief Editor of *Kompas*, expressed in one of our casual conversations together: “now my concern is not just about editorial matters, but also managerial and business matter.” (Randu, personal communication, July 22, 2014).

Furthermore, as a profit-oriented company, it is obvious that the newspaper expected to gain advertising revenue from both candidates. The fact that *Kompas* in nature is not just a newspaper, but also a business in which advertising is an important stream of revenue, was stated by its founder and owner, Jakob Oetema, decades ago:

*From an economic point of view, Kompas began to pioneer the press business. The others did not even think of maximizing advertisements. Their emphasis was on the editorial side. That explained why the most highly placed were the journalists, the editors (yang hebat itu hanya wartawan, hanya redaksi). At Kompas, we left that concept behind.*

*The press was an amalgam of editors, managers, and printers. In other words, a newspaper should be supported by an organism, an organizational structure. That was why the men who took care of business management were those who graduates from the University of Indonesia's Department of Economics. (Oetema in Dakidae, 1991: 250)*

From the quotation above, the importance of advertising revenue for *Kompas* as a media company is clear, and therefore it seems reasonable that being friendly to both candidates would increase their chance to be used as a medium of advertising for both campaigns.

Here again, we can observe the impact of the particular Javanese habitus that, as I argued in the previous chapter, shapes the character of reporting at *Kompas*. The neutral position has been justified by the shared cultural belief among the journalists to not hurt the feelings of the power holders, which was very much shaped by the Javanese values to respect those in power in order to maintain social harmony. As suggested by Geertz (1960), maintaining social harmony is important even if it is only a veneer. This is the reason why, unlike Sambrook (2012), who has suggested that neutrality should involve transparency, the individual support of *Kompas* journalists for Jokowi was not made transparent by the newspaper in its editorial, nor formalized as an official endorsement.

This situation reflects the habitus of the newspaper, which developed during the authoritarian era to always be indirect and cautious in their political position. In the words of one of its senior journalists:

*The journalists from the generation of Mas Randu as well as those before him often got a phone call from Pak Jakob; this also shaped their character...as the younger generation, we have never experienced the call from Pak Jakob in which he would direct his anger... I believe this has provided the reasons why the more senior*

*journalists do not want to take up a straightforward position...Pak Jakob himself had experienced being banned by Suharto, forcing him to be more cautious... to some extent this past experience must still have influence. (Asep, Head of Political Desk, October 5, 2014)*

Despite believing that the cautious practice of journalism, which according to Asep was mainly performed by senior journalists, he himself also confirmed this cautiousness. He believed that exposing the wrongdoings of the power holders bluntly does not suit the values or style of *Kompas*, which emphasizes not causing offence. It was for this reason that he refused the idea of some reporters to fully unearth Prabowo's involvement in the human rights violation. For this, he suggested: "we might write about it, but it has to be in the *Kompas* way..." (Asep, personal communication, October 5, 2014).

But more than that, he also decided to drop some articles written by his colleagues, which he considered too critical. Very often, it resulted in complaints from them. In his words:

*They (Prabowo's supporters) were surprised when I told them that we did not publish many news items related to human rights. I said to Hasyim (Prabowo's brother), there were many articles which were already written, but we dropped them. On the contrary, when the news was not good about Jokowi, we never dropped it. For example, in the writing of Ong. He often complained to me, but we gave him an explanation. Our principle is not to hurt the feelings of Prabowo supporters. (Asep, personal communication, October 5, 2014)*

In the lines above, Asep explained that Prabowo's brother had come to *Kompas'* office to protest against some stories published by the newspaper, but that in response, Asep explained how he had already enforced much self-censorship to be favorable towards Prabowo. Such practices even resulted in protests and outrage from his own colleagues, but he persisted in order to be respectful towards the feelings of Prabowo supporters.

Apart from these colleagues that Asep mentioned who disagreed with his policy, I also found from my interview with Dina, another journalist from the political division, how upset she was that many of her stories about Prabowo were rejected: “For me, let’s just expose all of the candidates without exception, not just Prabowo but also Jokowi: all of their strengths and weaknesses. However, the elites did not agree. You could see here many investigative reports were dropped.” (Interview with Dina, February 27, 2015). Here it can be seen that unlike Asep, the Chief Editor of the political desk, the journalists in the lower ranks like Dina and Ong were more courageous in expressing their position. However, these reporters were powerless against their seniors. Even middle management supported the newspaper’s position, as evidenced in the example of Sutta, who despite being young is middle management, and this indicates how he had internalized the *Kompas Way* as part of his own habitus.

To some extent, the case of *Kompas* is surprisingly similar to the media position during the general election in the case of post-authoritarian Mexico. As argued by Ramirez (2012), neutrality is understood as equal space for the running candidates, although the angle might be less neutral. Furthermore, this neutrality is not so much motivated by a commitment to high journalistic standards nor to support democracy, but more as a catch-all strategy for gaining audiences and maintaining close relationship with any would-be president. No less importantly, the neutrality is aimed at avoiding confrontation with the next election winner, who might make them suffer economic disadvantage, seeing as government advertising remains one of the main sources of economic revenue for the media in Mexico. She further argued that this situation is influenced by the journalistic culture developed under the old authoritarian era in which the political parties, the government, and the state agencies had been the main advertisers for the print and the smaller broadcast media (Ramirez, 2012: 243). In the case of *Kompas*, the close relationship with the power holders as well as the need to avoid conflict with them was even more pressing, as there is also the additional interest to secure political protection from conservative Islamic groups.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown that *Kompas* maintained an ambiguous form of neutrality during the Indonesian presidential election of 2014. On one hand, the journalists embraced a formal institutional policy of neutrality, which is defined as not siding with either pairs of presidential candidates – Jokowi and Prabowo - running in the election. But on the other hand, most of the individual journalists at *Kompas* actually favored and supported Jokowi. This individual support from these journalists manifested in various forms, from giving political advice to Jokowi's campaign, to attending his campaign celebration. This support was displayed at various levels, from Jakob Oetama, the owner, to members of the editorial board, the Chief Editor of the political division, to the ordinary reporters, and it could be seen in the daily dynamics within the newsroom as election day approached.

In turn, the tension between the formal policy to be neutral and the individual preferences towards Jokowi-JK translated into the newspaper's ambiguous coverage of both pairs of candidates. *Kompas* managed to provide equal space for covering the campaigns of both candidates, both in the form of articles as well pictures. However, the tone of the coverage, both in written and visual form, was more in favor of Jokowi-JK. This favorability was reflected in the fact that there were no unfavorable articles or photographs of Jokowi, while 6.3% of articles and 3.4% of photos were unfavorable towards Prabowo. Furthermore, despite the number of unfavorable articles and photos of Prabowo being relatively small, the tone reflects a critical message, and tends to depict Prabowo as an elite who was distant from the people, and who has a history of human rights abuse. In contrast, Jokowi was framed as a leader who was humble, down to earth and committed to the people.

There are political, economic as well as cultural reasons underlying this ambiguous position. Politically, *Kompas* adopted the position to be neutral in order to stay close, and to avoid conflict with, whoever won the election. Economically, this position was taken to maximize its economic interest to

maintain its readership, and to keep gaining advertising revenue from both candidates. Finally, this position has been influenced by the habitus of the journalists themselves, which was developed primarily under the previous authoritarian era. This situation is surprisingly similar to the case in post-authoritarian Mexico, in which the legacy of the authoritarian past still has a hold on the current state of its journalism.

This chapter is consistent with the previous chapters in this *Ideals and Pragmatism* section: chapter 4 on self-censorship as well as chapter 5 on being a polite watchdog. All of the chapters have suggested that cultural factors are intertwined with political economy factors in shaping the ideals and practices of *Kompas* journalists. One of the political economy factors is the interest of the newspaper to stay close to the power holders. In the next chapter, it will be discussed how the newspaper's success in establishing a close relationship with the power holders has allowed it some influence over them and in the government's decision-making process at some crucial moments in Indonesian political history.