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I am quite convinced that Southasian solidarity is the only way forward as most of our region moves towards greater authoritarianism and increasing restrictions.

**Has digitisation really democratised the media/can it even the playing field for independent media? Where do you think the challenges remain?**

*We see the tools of digitisation being used to spread xenophobia and hatred. We see the challenge of "free" internet preventing organisations from earning a revenue, we see the flood of infotainment submerge serious journalism, and ever-increasing simplifications drown out journalism that seeks to map an increasingly complex world.*

Digitisation is a tool and like any tool, its efficacy depends on how it is used. It has made it possible for organisations like us to continue publishing at a time when it has become harder to move hard copies across borders. It has allowed space for stories that could never be told earlier.

However, we also see the tools of digitisation being used to spread

xenophobia and hatred. We see the challenge of "free" internet preventing organisations from earning a revenue, we see the flood of infotainment submerge serious journalism, we see algorithms short circuit our efforts to expand our knowledge, and ever-increasing simplifications drown out journalism that seeks to map an increasingly complex world.

**How we do "regulate" fake news and social media platforms like Facebook without censorship and curtailing the right to free speech?**

The comedian and actor Sacha Baron Cohen caused a stir recently when he said Facebook would have allowed Hitler to buy ads. I think there is a deep kernel of truth there that we are all missing. We have fought long and hard to make our print journalism more meaningful, we have paid the price for standing up to the onslaught of infotainment and against great challenges we have evolved standards, the red lines for what our newspapers will not advertise. Now in the name of new media, all those gains are being reversed. "Anything goes" seems to be the new mantra. We need to go back to the drawing board and remind ourselves of the standards that we evolved with great difficulty and move forward from there, not backward.

In terms of fake news—we need to pay considerably more attention. While we cannot pursue and debunk all fake news, I think we need to name and shame fake news at least when it appears

in mainstream media. That would be a beginning. We are far more comfortable rewarding good journalism but somehow shy away from calling out bad journalism. Why can't we, as journalists, be more openly critical of bad journalism the way we are critical of all other things? **Do you think the longform will survive the attention span of millennials and Gen Z?**

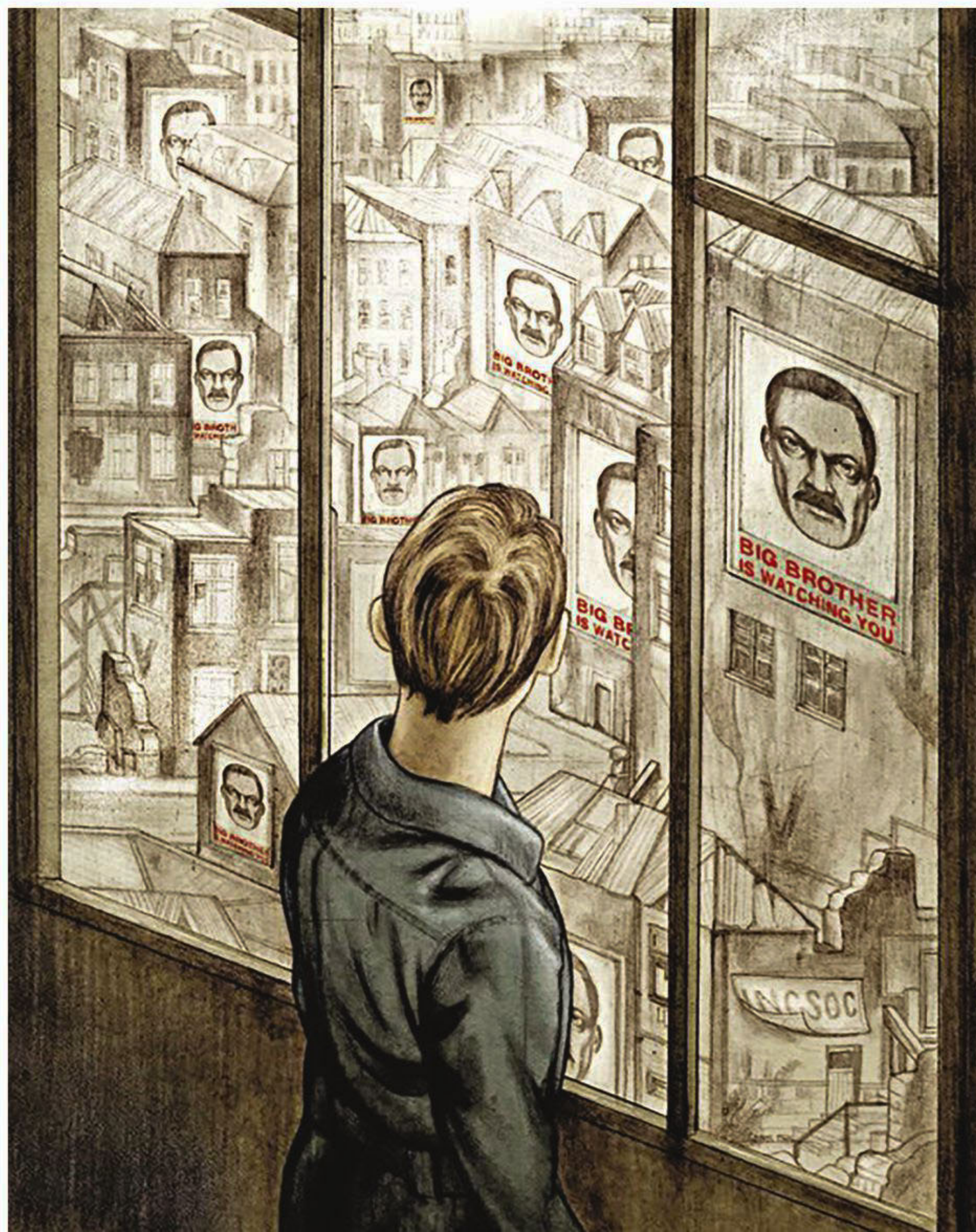
I actually think the time for longform is not past but yet to come and this is why: all of us have hundreds or thousands of articles we bookmark but never get around to reading; we read dozens of articles on the same subject and they often leave us none the wiser. Eventually we will want to cut through that volume and read incisive pieces—we will choose quality *because* we can't keep up with the quantity. We will look for articles that explain and increase our understanding instead of repeating what we have already read. That, precisely, will be longform.

Especially for many of us in small independent media, the question we need to ask is: Do we want to add to the flood of similar sounding articles, or can we even compete with larger organisations which have the capacity of producing large volumes? Or are we going to make a decisive move away from that and focus on creating something where we can actually bring value that other larger profit-oriented organisations cannot? Even if it is hard going in current times, that is where we need to be when the shift takes place.

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In addition to adopting the strategies of coercion and strategic silencing, new authoritarian rulers have been engaged in an innovative way to limit criticisms of their policies. Lucan Way and Steven Levitsky, in their seminal book titled *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (2010), noted that in many countries, the media are no longer under the direct control of the rulers. Instead, the rulers allow proliferation of private media; "but major media outlets are linked to the governing party—via proxy ownership, patronage, and other illicit means". This has become the new pattern in various authoritarian and hybrid regimes. Referring to some of the Latin American countries, Iria Puyosa writes in an article for *Global Americans* earlier this year, "Funds are directed from the government (through subsidies and advertising guidelines) to sympathetic media. At the same time, independent and critical media face various forms of intimidation, including control over supplies of paper and selective application of tax legislation."

Loyal supporters and business enterprises are provided with media licenses while opposition and independent media face significant hardships. There are instances of government-backed ownership takeovers to silence critical outlets. These steps not only ensure a domesticated mediascape by limiting contrarian views, but they shape political narratives. These narratives are



intended to undermine the legitimate and critical narratives presented, and investigations conducted by independent media.

As for the progressive attenuation of press freedom, another newly devised strategy is franchising censorship, i.e. allowing non-state actors to create an environment which discourages the media from being critical. In these instances, not only does the government remain silent when critical voices are attacked, but leaders and the party often also incite loyalists to attack independent voices and media. "Dissenting opinions are invariably subject to incessant attack and ridicule. Dissidents face a form of character assassination in which their views are twisted to make them appear foolish, radical, unpatriotic or immoral," mentions Iria Puyosa in the same article. Verbal harassment, defamation, and smearing are often used as weapons against journalists to force them to kowtow. Those who attack the media and journalists enjoy impunity.

Strategies adopted and tools used by new authoritarian and hybrid regimes to curb freedom of press are continuously evolving. Understanding these techniques are imperative for confronting these and fighting for freedom.

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