



The Dictator's (False) Dilemma

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One of the more persistent Cold War memes, the so-called dictator's dilemma refers to a worldview in which technology is a threat to dictatorships and a beacon of prosperity to free societies. But is this a valid dichotomy?

In some political circles, the phrase *dictator's dilemma* has taken wing. To big and powerful government types, the notion that widespread Internet access threatens to upset the status quo is the gauge boson of neoconservatism. According to Christopher Kedzie, the phrase was coined by Larry Press in reference to former Secretary of State George Shultz's comment in a 1985 *Foreign Affairs* article:¹

Totalitarian societies face a dilemma: either they try to stifle these technologies and thereby fall further behind in the new industrial revolution, or else they permit these technologies and see their totalitarian control inevitably eroded. In fact, they do not have a choice, because they will never be able entirely to block the tide of technological advance.

Shultz's remark seems insightful, but on closer inspection proves to be provocatively without substance. It betrays fundamental confusion about the nature of technology, in particular the Internet.

THE DICTATOR'S FALSE DILEMMA

Schultz's principle holds that dictators can't concurrently impose rigid censorship and expect their economies to grow—they must choose between these alternatives. This dichotomy is false and yet has been largely unchallenged by political commentators, policy analysts, and journalists since it first appeared in Schultz's article.

In *The Net Delusion*,² Evgeny Morozov points out that the dictator's dilemma drastically underestimates the ability to customize censorship. Indeed, from the network perspective, a dictator has enormous leverage over the access of digital information through surveillance of last-mile access, source controls, ISP user filters, planned outages, throttling, accessing and sharing data without warrant, and so forth. The list of possible network abuses is limited only by the dictator's imagination.

In fact, such tailor-made censorship isn't limited to dictatorships. Recently, the Brookings Institution published an interesting study of 606 incidents in 99 countries

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between 1995 and 2010 and found them almost evenly distributed between democratic (45 percent) and nondemocratic (52 percent) nations.³ Indeed, in terms of modalities used, “more democracies participate in network interventions than authoritarian regimes. However, authoritarian regimes conduct shutdowns with greater frequency.” This study corroborates Morozov’s thesis that the dictator’s dilemma is technologically naive and that associating it exclusively with dictatorships is a tactic for xenophobes. Rather, it’s more accurate to refer to an “authoritarian’s dilemma” because censorship is equally useful to all regimes, whether dictatorial, tyrannical, democratic, or theocratic.

Dictators and authoritarian political leaders can do much more than censor. A potpourri of banal nontechnical options exist that include brutality, incarceration, murder, extortion, torture, threats and intimidation, the use of National Security Letters and the All Writs Act, to name but a few. Killing off large numbers of dissidents always has a chilling effect on opposition movements—at least in the short term. The assertion that dictators can’t expand their economies in whatever ways they choose without opening the floodgates of international communication is silly. China is but one example in which old-world totalitarianism and new-world technical advances coexist relatively peacefully.

The way people are governed as it relates to the way they sustain themselves is a complicated matter and not easily taxonomized. Schultz’s remarks, and the putative dilemma itself, need to be considered in the ideological contexts from which they arose: economic neoliberalism and/or political neoconservatism with a staunchly pro-Western bias. The to-censor-or-not-to-censor dilemma is just a public relations tool. Why, then, would anyone

fall for this false dilemma? Two reasons immediately come to mind.

First, the phrase is short, memorable, and seemingly meaningful—exactly those traits required for memetic status. One of our great social failings is the tolerance of politics served up in sound bites and elevator pitches, even when they involve complex issues. Semantically, the dictator’s dilemma belongs with Manifest Destiny; containment; the Red Scare; the “wars” on drugs, poverty, and terror; and so forth—these are just handy slogans around which ideologues galvanize popular support. When analyzed critically, they’re overly simplistic and hyperpolitical.

Defining and measuring democracy is like defining capitalism or measuring free markets (or emotions or values, for that matter). As abstract concepts they don’t easily lend themselves to quantification; as a result, ideas about them face widespread and passionate disagreement. Democracy is an ideal that by its very political nature tends to be dominated by the autocratic and authoritarian, thus the steady-state is usually some form of oligarchy. Capitalism, too, tends to fall short of the ideal, and for similar reasons. As Adam Smith observed, “People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices.”⁴ The causes of the 2008 economic meltdown are testament to the accuracy of Smith’s observation.

The second reason why the dictator’s dilemma is such an appealing theme is that it’s in principle unfalsifiable. This is easy to see in its negation: dictators can concurrently impose rigid censorship and at the same time expect their economies to grow—they don’t have to choose one or the other. Note that we can make as much sense of the negation as the original

affirmation. The problem with the dilemma and its negation is the vagueness that accompanies such sweeping generalities. The reason for the appeal is that only dedicated scholars are willing to invest the time to parse them and attempt to verify them. One might easily generate such nonsensical principles ad nauseam:

- › The Republican dilemma is to simultaneously court public support while withholding disdain for the public.
- › The Democratic dilemma is to appear to support liberal principles while concealing Republican tendencies.
- › The capitalist’s dilemma is to support Adam Smith’s free-market ideals without revealing ignorance about what they actually are.
- › The Marxist’s dilemma is to overtly support the labor theory of capital while cloaking an aversion to hard work.

And so it goes. There are political consultants making a living generating such nonsense. It’s straightforward to conclude that—owing to their alignment with authoritarian principles—all large, centralized forms of governments are loathe to give up the power they wield and will do what it takes to protect it. This is true whether it involves the circumvention of Congress or Parliament, breach of law, or political betrayal. Thus, the dilemma in its original form isn’t just for the dictator.

BLACK, WHITE, AND RED

After US politicians criticized Russian leader Vladimir Putin’s “tandemocracy” with Dmitry Medvedev as undemocratic, Putin pointed out that the US is also guilty of electoral chicanery—namely, that four American presidents have been elected with-

out winning the popular vote (John Quincy Adams, Rutherford B. Hayes, Benjamin Harrison, and George W. Bush). Because these events don't disqualify the US from being a "democratic" country in the ordinary sense of the term, he argues, neither should tandem democracy disqualify Russia from being a democratic country in a similar sense.⁵ One person's tandem democracy is another's dominant minority.

Setting aside the finger pointing, Putin's view that democracy isn't an absolute measure—it's relative—is precisely the point that Shultz over-

One measure upon which a nation's categorization is based is the degree to which it holds free and fair elections. The survey asks appointed, alleged experts questions such as, "Are there fair electoral laws, equal campaigning opportunities, fair polling, and honest tabulation of ballots?" Fair compared to what? Compared to North Korea, Nigeria might score well in this regard, but not so well when compared to Sweden. Are such comparisons meaningful? This is like trying to compare water temperatures with a blank-faced meat thermometer: all that you can

served to review their survey checklist.⁶ Though of questionable scholarly value, ideologues, partisans, and polemicists of all stripes are continuously using the resulting reports to buttress bad ideas, faulty conclusions, and unviable policies. Putatively objective measures and categorizations of concepts like freedom, capitalism, free markets, and happiness should be taken with large grains of salt.

To return to the central point, the dictator's dilemma used oversimplification to generate a primitive tribalist support for an ideology. Shultz's goal was to buttress support for anti-Soviet biases and agendas. As it turns out, the Soviet Union was in the final stages of economic implosion before Shultz became secretary of state. The axiom that poor understandings lead to even poorer policies is appropriate here.

A clearer picture of the continuum of democracies we referenced can be found in the works of political scientist Daniel Levitsky⁷ and political commentator Fareed Zakaria.⁸ Levitsky refers to the scale of the democratic continuum as "competitive authoritarianism," whereas Zakaria uses the term "illiberal democracy" to refer to democracies that fall short of constitutional liberalism. In both cases these authors describe partial or limited democracies in which elections do take place, but the electorate is prevented from knowing enough about the political activities of those in control to make wise electoral choices. Sociologist Edward Shils¹⁰ and legal scholar Alan Westin¹¹ make even clearer distinctions between authoritarianism and democracy.

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looked. Shultz's black-and-white view isn't based in the real world, and that reinforces our explanation of why the dictator's dilemma became memetic. Though false, it appeals to those who see the world as politically dichotomous—or at least easily categorized with clear boundaries.

This appeal is reflected in widely referenced and equally disputed Freedom House reports that purport to provide meaningful rankings of countries based on a comparative analysis of the state of global freedom. In these reports, countries are categorized as "free," "partly free," or "not free." It should come as no great surprise that the nations most closely allied with Freedom House's host (US) typically score very highly. Coincidence? Is the survey loaded? It's loaded in the sense that its confusing methodology and the coarseness of its measures lack the ability to make meaningful distinctions based on clear boundaries. However, that isn't clear from the summaries. All of the covered nations fall conveniently into one of three categories irrespective of any underlying ambiguities or biases.

really tell is that one object is warmer/cooler now than it was at some other time, or that one object is warmer/cooler than another, but that isn't useful for categorizing something as hot or cold or sufficiently cooked. Similarly, these survey questions seem ad hoc, arbitrary, and not grounded in solid scholarship. To be useful, of course, measures must be calibrated with widely accepted frames of reference and fixed points that are universally agreed upon.

So it is with crude measures of electoral processes. Does the US presidential election of 2000 qualify as fair and honest? Was the selection of a candidate—who had the lesser popular vote and likely the lesser electoral vote—by the Supreme Court consistent with the principles of free, partly free, or not free? It's clear the notion of a "free and fairelection" is a moving target and subject to interpretation. Trying to measure the degree of fairness in electoral processes will produce conclusions that aren't intellectually satisfying, as they attempt to base dichotomies on imprecision. Recalcitrant defenders of Freedom House reports would be well

REVERSE-TECHNOPOMORPHISM

The dictator's dilemma arises from what I'll call *reverse-technopomorphism*. Technopomorphism imbues humans with technological characteristics, for example, "increasing one's personal bandwidth." The reverse implies imparting social and cultural qualities like intent, trends, purpose, and

direction onto technology platforms and infrastructures. Unlike anthropomorphism, which is the attribution of human form to nonhuman entities and objects (robotics could get us there, but we're not there yet), reverse-technopomorphism deals with social and cultural phenomena. Shultz suggests that there may be some form of cultural determinism behind the Internet and communications. This is the same position former State Department advisor Jared Cohen took during Iran's Green Revolution:² "[social networking technology] is one of the most organic tools for democracy promotion the world has ever seen."

But we know that social networking can be a tool for a great many things, including invasion of privacy, identity theft, extortion and blackmail, public and private surveillance, suppressing political dissent, and the like—to say nothing of sharing birthday photos and updates of family outings. The same could and likely was said about the telegraph and telephone, and we must avoid the temptation to read too much into our experience with such technology. The power elite that control us also control the way technology is used.

Why are we tempted to think this way? Perhaps Jipp's Law¹¹ provides a clue. It claims an association between a country's telecommunication saturation and its gross domestic product. Although a positive correlation seems obvious, a causal connection is elusive. Certainly we would expect to see increases in domestic productivity associated with increases in use of convenience technologies and creature comforts, including communications devices, television, and video games, but one might say the same of expensive jewelry, personal watercraft, fashionable eyewear, and investments in information and communications equities. It's a mistake to ask whether technologies have multiplier effects on economic development—they're a large part of that economic development. Technology is primarily a by-product of economic development,

not the dominant causative agent—as the economic development tide goes, so go the technology shipments, and vice versa. Though a red herring, Jipp's Law helped usher in the current craze of techno-causation whereby technology makes everything _____ (fill in the blank), and promises to _____, while guiding our _____, and demanding our best _____.

We really need to get over the temptation to reduce everything to sound bites and catch phrases. It distracts us from issues of importance. Rather than investigating for themselves whether the dictator's dilemma even made sense, an entire generation of political pundits and media experts just accepted it as true. This herd mentality is responsible to a large extent for the global mistakes made by nations.

If you want to know what technology is capable of, conduct a desk audit of a professional computer scientist, engineer, designer, and the like, and watch what they do on a day-to-day basis to earn a living. The aggregation of all those audits is the "bigger picture." It's only through that level of understanding that we can avoid being distracted from reality by such things as reverse-technopomorphisms. Absent such reflection we will continue to miss the fact that the true driving forces behind technology's evolution are variegated, sometimes conflicting, and not always focused. The real business of technology is how it's used daily, and, with few exceptions (for example, technological bad faith¹²), it's free of intent.

The dictator's dilemma is a paradigmatic case of how unwise it is to be both overconfident and myopic in framing policy.

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