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Communities in Control Conference: The Lucky Country
Conference

Melbourne, 27 May, 2014

Presentation by

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It is so lovely to be in this room with all these people who do fantastic work, thank you so much for inviting me to come and speak to you.

But because I am just naturally a bit subversive, I was given the topic “Good Communication” and I dutifully went away and prepared, and then I got a bee in my bonnet.

So I threw out the “Good Communication” speech and I'm going to give you the speech that I wrote with the bee in my bonnet. So I hope you forgive me for that, it's going to take you to places you perhaps didn't expect to go on a Tuesday afternoon in Melbourne in 2014.

But its places I think we need to go, because we are not very good at looking back.

One of my hats is as an historical novelist. I've written a young adult novel about Elizabeth 1st called *Just a Girl*, and I've just completed the sequel called *Just a Queen*. So I have been immersed in the 1560s, so I am going to take you back there, just for a while and the reasons will become clear as I take you on my journey, the journey I've been on.

In 1440 Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press and changed the world. Prior to this technical marvel every book had to be handwritten, predominately by monks, labouring in scriptoriums.

Information was controlled by a tiny number of educated scholars, most of whom were priests of the Catholic Church and almost all books were Bibles.

Virtually everyone else was illiterate. Information was guarded zealously and people were woefully ignorant. Those in power liked it that way.



The many bibles and religious texts that were laboriously produced by hand were written exclusively in Latin, a language ordinary people did not understand. When people participated in worship and it was compulsory, religious ceremonies were conducted in the same dead language with the priest behind a screen, his back to the congregation. Worshippers were only permitted to participate in a preordained ritualistic manner.

Indeed it was one of the tenants of the Catholic Church that ordinary people should neither read the word of God nor pray to God directly. Their only contact with their maker had to be through a man of God, a priest. Everything else was hearsay.

In this way the priests and the church controlled virtually all information in Europe for centuries, until 1440. And through controlling information of course, they also controlled the population.

In 2011 as I just told you, I published a historical young adult novel, first person account of the early life of Elizabeth Tudor, before she was crowned queen of England in January 1559.

In 2015 I'll publish a sequel taking Elizabeth's life up to the execution of Mary Queen of Scots in 1587. Writing these books meant I had to research the life and times of my heroine and narrator. As I did I began to see powerful resonances with the present, some of you may be getting a hint of what I'm thinking about.

Elizabeth Tudor's very existence was a direct consequence of the dramatic changes happening in the power structures and organisation of the world at that time. Changes that are the result, as I suspect they always are, of a technological innovation.

Elizabeth Tudor was born during the tumult that followed the first information revolution; we are currently living through the second.

It was the invention of the printing press that gave rise to the protestant reaffirmation, suddenly books, most of which remained Bibles, could be produced much more rapidly and in greater numbers and at much lower cost.

With more books available, supply created demand. People, particularly those with means, began to learn to read. Even before Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in 1522, cracks were beginning to appear in the iron clad control the Catholic Church had previously exercised over access to information and knowledge.

Even the language of knowledge started to change. Luther translated the bible in to the German vernacular and William Tyndale translated it into English. Such was the churches fear of the spread of information, both men were excommunicated. Tyndale was eventually condemned as a heretic, strangled and his body burnt at the stake.

But even in the face of such draconian consequences, people continued to demand their own direct relationship with god and their right to read the bible in their own language. What people were really agitating for perhaps, was access to information and knowledge. They were no longer willing to know, only what the priestly class wanted them to know.

Elizabeth Tudor's mother Anne Boleyn was a devout and evangelical Protestant. Famous is the coquette who held a king's ardour at bay for a decade, until he eventually made her queen. It was his determination to get a divorce from his Catholic first wife, so he could marry Anne, which led to his country's break with Rome and the establishment of the Protestant Church of England.

Henry the Eighth was a Protestant for political, dynastic and sexual purposes. But Boleyn was a true believer, her tenacious commitment to ideas such as each

Christian's right to a direct and personal relationship with God, was one of the reasons she made so many powerful enemies.

In response to the protestant schism and the threat it posed to their power and control, the Catholic Church burnt heretics, hunted them down and tortured them.

The Spanish Inquisition was formed to stamp out hearsay. Huguenots were massacred in France and wars were fought between protestant and catholic nations. Elizabeth herself lived under a Catholic “fatwa”; Protestants by the way were brutal and fanatical too, this is not just one-sided.

None of it worked, the Catholic Church had to slowly share power, not only with Protestants but also with the growing secular society that emerged as a result of widening education.

From ruling half the world, to such an extent that Pope Alexander VI actually divided the New World in two, and gave one half to the Spanish and the other to the Portuguese – (see the fabulous film *The Mission* if you want to see how that worked) Catholicism became just another branch of Christianity.

As education and knowledge spread, the reaffirmation was followed by the enlightenment, and all the liberation movements that followed thereafter. Including the abolition of slavery, child labour and increased rights for women. After all if every man could have his own relationship with God, why not every woman, why not every slave?

This democratisation of the word of God, led slowly but logically and inexorably to democracy itself – predicated on the idea that all men, even perhaps women, were created equal. Everyone ended up entitled to, not just a relationship with God, but with a vote and a say.

One followed inevitably I think from the other. As those in power understand only too well, once a few difficult questions begin to be asked, a great many more will follow.

The internet is at least as revolutionary as the printing press, and we can already see the effect it is having on today's information gatekeepers.

In the West these are no longer the churches, although they battle on manfully. The mainstream media, I used manfully advisedly there. The mainstream media, particularly newspaper proprietors, the high priests who used to set the daily political agenda, big business, banks, retailers, governments, are all feeling the loss of control.

Many of them are thrashing about in protest, trying to hold on to the power that they once held so effortlessly, they may have begun to see it as a divine right. I'm nice and tactful there – they obviously began to see it as a divine right.

Now that literally everybody with a smart device not only has access to the media but the actual ability to create content themselves. Things that used to be kept quiet are getting out. Suddenly everyone can have a direct relationship with what used to be privileged information. Wiki leaks and Edward Snowden have brought that home to the powers that be in no uncertain terms.

I can't help wondering if Assange, Snowden and Bradley Manning, are the William Tyndales of our time. They can expect no mercy if they are – as Manning has already discovered.

Wherever you look in the modern world, old certainties are collapsing. Bricks and mortar retailers are struggling to hold on to customers and profits. The music industry is returning to concerts, troubadouring if you like, and touring to make money. Not just because of internet piracy, but also because even when fans legally purchase their downloads, prices and so profits have collapsed.



The same is true for books, films and television. Apparently Australians are the biggest pirate downloader's of *Game of Thrones* in the world, I think we should be proud of that.

Advertisers are in a cold sweat about how to catch viewer's attention in these days of fragmenting media. Apple TV, IQ live pause and Fast Forward, those who rely on making a profit to exist, are badly shaken. Rupert Murdoch began his attack on the new media landscape by berating public broadcasters like the BBC and ABC, that has not stopped.

Aware that they're publically subsidised model allowed them to offer viewers much better service than his stations could afford. Public broadcasters are now under siege around the world for apparently being successful. Murdoch's desperation over holding on to the readers and viewers that gave him relevance, has led to staff at some of his newspapers using the new technology to break the law, and invade the privacy of those who attract the attention of a fickle public.

Arguably it is the sense of having lost control that drives people to take escalating risks.

Newspapers – direct products of the invention of the printing press – appear to be on the brink of extinction, at least in hard copy. And news stories no longer break on the evening news or in the first edition headlines or even on radio. They break on Twitter and on Facebook. The witnesses to earth-shattering events now upload their Smartphone photos and videos instantly. Who needs an expensive camera crew anymore?

Even that indomitable old dame feminism has found herself firmly back on the political agenda, thanks to women's unmediated access to the public

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conversation for the very first time in history. They don't have to ask a bloke if they can publish it, they can put it up if they want to.

When the women of India find the courage to march in the streets to protest the endemic rapes in that country – because of access to social media, even the poorest have smart phones, and because that access has allowed them to express their feelings to one another in ways that were never available to them before – you know the world is changing.

The current outpouring of rage by women – see the #YesAllWomen hashtag – over the massacre of college students by a man who felt he was entitled to punish women because they were not attracted to him, is another expression of the change this unmediated access via the internet is making to the balance of power to the world.

The response of today's powerful class to their comprehensive loss of control mirrors that of the Catholic Church 500 years ago. They are furious and they are fighting back. Politics have moved sharply to the right. Only three decades ago it was a conservative government that reacted with compassion and generosity to the first boat people from Vietnam.

Today even Labor Governments appear to be in some kind of competition with their conservative counterparts as to who can be the most cruel. This sense of the old certainties starting to crumble also explains the increased aggression and irrationality of old fashioned lobby groups like the NRA.

Never mind the evidence, even the 28 dead, most of whom were very young children at the tragic Sandy Hook massacre, fear of losing power and control is only likely to make those who feel threatened, clutch their weapons closer. You can see how this works.

It is human nature to react to a sense of losing control in general, by clamping down twice as hard on anything you can control in particular. Hence perhaps the triumph of the measurement maniacs, you may identify with this, in areas like health, education, government policy and management theory.

How much more paperwork can we all do? How many more meetings can we all attend? How much more time do we have to spend accounting for the things we haven't actually got time to actually put into practice? Please could the process gurus just f*** off.

What now goes by the once liberal term of reform, often looks much more like old fashion authoritarian control, when viewed up close. Forget fascism and communism, what we may be facing now, and this is really interesting and came to me from a fabulous author called C J Sampson. What we may be facing now is the development of toxic democracies, based on nationalism and xenophobia.

The latest results in the paper today of Le Pin's extreme rightwing party the National Front in France, is an example of a developing toxic democracy. Nationalism and xenophobia are both favourite boltholes for the frightened, the threatened and the insecure. The rise of the Tea Party, the UKIP, Le Pin as I said and even perhaps PUP, are early signs of just such a fear based response.

If things feel out of control, we look for scapegoats for the other to blame.

At the moment we seem to be blaming the poor, which is an interesting scapegoat. I believe that Marie Antoinette did that and it didn't turn out well.

But it is in climate change denial that the powerful most resemble the Catholic Church of the 15th century. Faced with the literally earth shattering realisation that the old economic model of continuous growth is starting to decline, and the planet's resources are not infinite, many of those running the world have reacted by closing their eyes and covering their ears, stubbornly refusing to see.

Like the inquisitors of old, they prefer to accuse climate scientists of heresy and conspiracy and listen to not only what they have to say but also what they can prove. Shades of the Pope and Galileo perhaps. Using somewhat more subtle tactics than burning or torturing, they have still managed to intimidate many into a nervous silence. Have a look at the ABC right now.

When mining magnates like Gina Rinehart buy up shares in Australia's only mildly left leaning news empire and threaten to challenge the long held tradition of editorial independence of the Age and the Sydney Morning Herald, it's hard to see it as anything but an attempt to take back power and control.

She and others like her are taking a modern twist on excommunication. Those who disagree with her view of the world, she will attempt to silence.

Of course it didn't work for the Catholic Church then and it won't work for the powers that be now. But if history is any guide, and it's the only one we've got, we should expect the powerful to fight back and to fight dirty for some time to come, before they bow to the inevitable.

The recent Federal Budget is a small example of the way the powerful will try to repress and control by whatever means they can.

Living in a constant state of crisis helps keep people docile. Frightening them into compliance by taking away social safety nets is another way. As is exhausting them, by making jobs insecure and asking them to work until they drop.

See how this all adds up to people thinking: "I just have to put my head down and work all hours, and never complain and never stand up for anything. Because if I get fired, I don't know what might happen to me."

Because a user pays society means that you are only secure while you have the means to pay. And that means you have to keep working and working and

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working. Seeing people being fired around you makes everybody frightened, even if you yourself don't get fired.

Sending religious chaplains, even though they're lovely, so people tell me – I see them as foot soldiers of the authoritarians – sending religious chaplains into secular schools is another example. Because religion is a control mechanism.

It is astonishing to me that the only part of education to receive a real boost in this budget is that chaplaincy program, at the same time as they've closed it down to secular chaplains.

They all must now be Christian chaplains; I can't see that as anything other than authoritarian.

Increasing the barriers to further education to higher education is another way of keeping control in the hands of the already privileged.

Noam Chomsky puts it like this: Students who acquire large debts putting themselves through school are unlikely to think about changing society. When you trap people in a system of debt, they can't afford the time to think. Tuition fee increases are a disciplinary technique, and by the time students graduate they are not only loaded with debt, but have also internalised the disciplinarian culture.

This makes them efficient components of the consumer economy.

So what used to be a liberal education, which was all about getting young people to question society in which they lived and criticise it and try to improve it has become the opposite. It has become an education to train you to do a job and to make you shut up.

Think about women, I'm talking about they're rising in power, thanks to social media. Wherever there's an action there's an equal and opposite reaction. The

equal and opposite reaction of these higher education fees are particularly pernicious for women.

Women already earn 17.3% less than men do; men earn about that much more in the dollar.

If women do a degree, they will be charged the same price of the degree as their male peers. If they take time out to have a family, they will not be paying back that degree at the same rate. If they then go back to work part time, they will not be paying back that degree at the same rate.

So men who are paid more anyway, right from the first day they graduate from university, who I think the averages earn a million dollars more than their female peers, across a lifetime of work, may well pay - let's pick a number out of the air, say the degree is \$60,000, may pay \$60,000 for their degree, whereas their female peers may pay \$75,000 for their degree, while earning less as a result.

Talk about a reaction, it's a clever one, very clever.

Now I'm not saying that the Liberal Government have done all this consciously, as a conspiracy, I don't think they have. I don't think they've thought this out. But as I was taught in my advertising career long ago, if you want to know why someone does something, follow the benefit. Look at who benefits and who loses and you might start to find some clues.

But the part of the world where the impact of this latest information revolution may be most powerfully felt is in those parts of it that did not experience a reaffirmation last time around.

We can see that already, in what used to optimistically be called the Arab Spring. Not just the explosions of descent in Egypt, Libya, Syria and now Thailand, but also the general resurgence of fundamentalist Islam and

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Christianity for that matter. They make perfect sense when looked at through the prism of history.

In 15th century Europe, the once all powerful church tried, vainly as it turned out, to shut down access to newly available information and to continue to control the population. In the 21st century, extreme anti information movements – like the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram who even say it in their name – are attempting to do precisely the same thing.

In the West, schools that seek to teach creationism rather than evolution, are our home grown varieties, and I would say climate change denial is somewhere in the same area.

These people will fail, so will the authoritarians and the previously all powerful information gate keeps in the west. The only question is how long it will take until they do, we do not have the same luxury in terms of time that we had in the 15th century.

Climate scientists believe it may already be too late to cap global warming at two degrees and no one really wants to contemplate what affect uncontrollable global warming may have.

Add to that the super destructive weapons that technology has put into the hands of modern humans, and I cannot help fearing what state the world may be left in once the virtual reaffirmation has run its course.

In the words of George Santayana: Those who fail to learn their lessons of history are doomed to repeat them.

My only hope and my plea is that we repeat them in a hurry. We need to get moving and we need to recognise that we cannot give up our hard fought rights to those who are frightened by the idea of losing their advantage.

And that's what they're fearing. Every time you hear someone say: “Oh the worst thing you can be these days is a middle age white bloke”, you are hearing somebody who realises that an advantage his cohort has had for 2000 years is beginning to disappear.

This is good news for everybody, it'll be good news for them too when it happens. But it ain't going to happen easily, and that's what I wanted to write about.

I was writing about this period in history and I'm thinking, bing, bing, bing as I wrote about it. Thinking this is just the same as what's happening now.

So, thank you for letting me indulge myself with my bee in my bonnet.

