

William Tyndale was arrested and jailed, convicted of heresy, sentenced to death by strangulation, and then burnt at the stake. That was how the Monarchy and the Church dealt with ‘traitors’ and threats to their power in 1536. We’re a bit more civilised today – in most countries – but we still have government organisations, professional bodies, corporates, and NFPs with their own ways of condemning those who try to do what William Tyndale was doing 500 years ago.

So what was Tyndale’s crime? He translated the Bible into English and tried to make it available to the masses. Indeed, Tyndale’s Bible was the first to be published in English. Previous attempts had been subject to the death penalty, and the burning of any texts discovered. We are supposed to now live in enlightened times and in a digital communications age where information is freely available. We are told that openness and transparency are essential for a modern democracy and for a business or organisation operating in this ‘age of accountability’. We have the internet, wiki-based sharing of knowledge, open source software, instant messaging, citizen journalism, company information freely available on websites, school performance results available to parents, in some countries at least.

And yet, we still have an army of people out there trying to stop us getting access to information and trying to ‘control the message’ just like the Churches and Governments did in the 16th Century. We still have professionals who exclude people via their technical language. We have scientists who keep us at a distance despite all the attempts of popular science programmes to let us in on the secret. We have judges and lawyers tying us in knots with legal jargon and Latin phrases that no-one else ever uses these days.

We have government advisers, spin doctors, media relations advisers to the bishop, corporate communications departments, and many others who now form a new profession which prides itself on ‘controlling the message’ and deciding what the masses can have access to.

William Tyndale advocated a simple truth. If the Bible really was the source of wisdom and guidance the priests said it was in their weekly sermons – drawing from the Greek, Hebrew, and Latin texts – then why not make the whole book available in English for all English-speaking people to read and benefit from? In essence, Tyndale was saying why not allow people to find their own salvation in their own interpretations rather than have someone else pick selected translated text and give people one particular interpretation based on the view of a minister or church? But here we are in 2017. The ‘need to know’ principle is alive and kicking in many institutions and organisations. We still have thousands of boards, cabinets, committees, senior leadership teams, and managers who operate on the same basis as the Churches did in Tyndale’s day. They give us information when they think we need it, with their particular spin on it, plus selected evidence that supports their interpretation, not the full source material, so without full openness and transparency. For many managers, the power to control the message and the information flow is the only power they have left, and they are hanging on to it until the bitter end. And it will end. To not accept this is

to swim against the tide – and swim they do against the waves of new affiliative, collaborative, deliberative, democratic, and facilitative styles of running organisations that have evolved for the real world we are living in today.

Society is shifting permanently in the direction of greater openness and accountability. Digital communications technology, citizen journalism and participative democracy are changing our world in a way that governments, institutions, companies, organisations and managers cannot resist. They will still put up the barricades, get the wagons round in a circle, disappear into their bunkers, and fool themselves into believing they are still in charge – with their command and control structures and hierarchies – but time and reality will prove otherwise.

It is incredibly threatening for the control freaks that so many managers and communicators are. They will continue to react as the King and the Church did in Tyndale's day. Non-complying employees are sent to metaphorical dungeons. Non-aligned voices are strangled. Whistleblowers are metaphorically burnt at the stake. Annual Reports and official communication no longer read like Latin but they appear in a new form of language – Sanitised English – thoroughly washed of any undesirable messages or alternative interpretations of source material.

These days there are many complaints about politicians, the media, and manipulative activists putting out 'fake news' but we have an institutionalised inauthenticity in a lot of our daily stream of controlled communication that emanates from governments, businesses, sporting organisations, big charities, etc. As soon as any organisation is large enough to think it has something to lose, it starts to try and protect what it has, and its first line of defence is trying to control information and the narrative around it.

William Tyndale's immediate legacy was to make 'The Good Book' much more accessible. He had four challenges – translating the text, publishing the translation, getting the publication to a wide audience, and trying to avoid the forces trying to stop him making it available. If Tyndale were alive today, he might be using online translation programs and publishing other key texts on his website. Life would be much easier from that perspective.

However, he would still have people trying to stop him publishing certain material, and trying to control the narrative around it. If he worked in a government organisation, church, professional association, corporate or big charity, he would probably think the attempts to 'control the agenda' were – as a young social media commentator might put it these days – "so 16th Century"!

For graded assignment: <https://aeon.co/ideas/do-we-possess-our-possession-or-do-they-possess-us>