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don't burn anyone at the stake today

(and other lessons from history about living through an information crisis)

naomi alderman

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'Superb, sane and inspiring' OLIVER BURKEMAN

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'The best book about the Internet I've ever read. Changed how I think about human history, the people I fight with on social media AND my own relationship with my phone, which is quite a lot for 150 pages' Jonn Elledge

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'Naomi Alderman has done more than write a Protect and Survive manual for the toxic fallout of the social media age: this is a book that will help you to live, hopefully, in the one thing that none of us can escape – the historical moment' Matthew Sweet

'In *Don't Burn Anyone at the Stake Today*,
Naomi Alderman maps the torrid terrain of
the digital age and its implications for humanity
with tenderness and clarity'
Mandu Reid

'Wise and compassionate, acknowledging that
humans change, and make mistakes, and sometimes
even grow beyond them' Joanne Harris

'*Don't Burn Anyone at the Stake Today* is the product
of really deep thinking and a tremendously generous
mind. It is the antidote to doomscrolling: a book
that made me think in an entirely new way about
the age we live in and which will make you excited about
our era rather than merely terrified of it' Ian Dunt

'*Don't Burn Anyone at the Stake Today* is a
serious – and also very funny – history of
how we got to this point in the information
revolution and a wise guide to navigating our
way through it' Erica Wagner

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Contents

the most useful thing

What is the most useful thing you could know about your own life?

That's a question with a lot of possible answers. In this book I am suggesting a general answer – something that we might all get some use out of knowing about our own lives. It is: the name of the era you're living through.

We all live in history. A lot of the problems that face us, and the opportunities that present themselves, are defined not by our own choices or even the specific place or government we're living under, but by the particular epoch of human events that our lives happen to coincide with.

Just for example: the Industrial Revolution presented opportunities for certain kinds of business success – it made some people very rich while others became very poor and exploited. If you'd known that was the name of your era, it would have given you a clue about what kinds of events to prepare for. If you'd known that your time would later be called the Reign of Terror, that would also have given you a useful warning. We can choose to resist our era, to go with it, to exploit it or try to retreat from it. But only when we know what it is.

So, in this book I'm suggesting a name for the era we're living through. It is: the Information Crisis. It's not a single moment, it's an epoch – we're in the middle of it already

and if you're reading this book within a couple of decades of 2025 when I'm writing it, sorry, but this information crisis is going to be going on for the rest of our lives.

Even more importantly, I'm arguing that this is the third great information crisis that human beings have gone through. The previous two were the invention of writing, and the invention of the Gutenberg printing press. Digital communications technology is the third crisis. I think these prolonged crises aren't just neutral technical improvements. I think they change us psychologically, socially and emotionally in profound ways that simply cannot be reversed. And I suspect we can learn a huge amount from looking at the previous two crises – to understand what we're facing, how it's likely to feel, the way it's going to change us and what are the best ways through.

This is a kind of speculative historical project, I grant you. I can't know what's going to happen in the future. But the more I've looked at the transition from oral culture to literacy, and from handwriting to printing presses, the more I've seen the same patterns. The more what we're living through right now feels eerily familiar.

I'm about to make some pretty radical claims about what information crises do to us. But although I'm drawing some threads together, I'm not the first to point out these links. The writers Walter Ong and Eric Havelock have written about the changes in human consciousness after the invention of – particularly – phonetic script; that is, a script like the one we use in English today, where all the words can be sounded out just by seeing them written down.

The Axial Age was a time between the eighth and third

centuries BCE when many of our greatest religious and philosophical thinkers lived. It takes in, in the words of the historian Arnaldo Momigliano, 'the China of Confucius and Lao-Tse, the India of Buddha, the Iran of Zoroaster, the Palestine of the Prophets and the Greece of the Philosophers'. The Axial Age represented a massive leap in thinking where people began to be able to think *about* thinking, to consider the minds we live in. The Egyptologist Jan Assmann has suggested that the Axial Age was a 'media event' which would never have happened without the invention of writing. That is to say: it's been *300,000* years or so since modern *Homo sapiens* emerged; in that time there have probably been many wonderful, wise teachers, but if there was no writing, once they were gone their thoughts were quickly gone too. It's only in the last *3,000* years that anyone who hadn't *met* those wonderful teachers could read their words decades or even centuries after their death and become a follower. That couldn't have happened without writing.

The links between the invention of the printing press and the Reformation are also well known. The historians and thinkers Elizabeth Eisenstein, Neil Postman, Tom Holland, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Marshall McLuhan have all written about how the invention of print technology meant that ordinary people could do away with intermediaries and connect for themselves with the writings about one of those wonderful teachers – Jesus. One historian of the Reformation, Bernard Cottret, has written: 'It was not the Reformation that created a need to read Scripture, but the reading of Scripture that brought

about . . . the Reformation.' That widespread reading of scripture was only made possible by the printing press.

And what does that all mean for us? What we can see from the last two information crises is that there are enormous leaps forward in knowledge and understanding . . . but also a period of intense instability. After the invention of writing, the Axial Age was filled with new beautiful ideas and new moralities. And there was also the possibility of new kinds of warfare, motivated at least as much by religious and philosophical differences, or different interpretations of texts, as by desire for new territory or property. After the invention of the printing press came the Enlightenment, an explosion of new scientific knowledge and discovery. But before that Europe plunged into the Reformation, the creation of new Protestant Christian churches which broke away from the Catholic Christian church, no longer accepted the authority of the Pope and believed that priests weren't necessary for people to have a direct relationship with God. Catholics and Protestants were at war for centuries, different countries took different sides, even families were divided. The violence of the Reformation led to the destruction of statues and other artworks and many institutions that had been working at least *adequately* well until then.

And, to get to the heart of the matter, the Reformation in Europe meant a lot of people got burned at the stake, or killed in other terrible ways. Burning at the stake certainly didn't *begin* with the printing press and the Reformation; it's a very ancient form of death-by-torture. But it did happen during European conflicts of Reformation.

Take Michael Servetus, a person one feels really led a very worthwhile life. Born in Spain in around 1511, he studied at the University of Paris, learned and wrote about a huge number of different subjects – Wikipedia lists 'mathematics, astronomy and meteorology, geography, human anatomy . . . jurisprudence, translation, poetry' – and was the first European to give an accurate account of how pulmonary circulation works. Caught up in the fervour of the Reformation, he ended up burned at the stake for heresy in Geneva, after being condemned by Luther and Calvin. Or take Peter Ramus, the inventor of the concept that you should write a textbook on any subject by proceeding first through more simple things and then to more complex things. He was a Protestant, killed by the mob in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris in 1572.

Just to think for a brief moment about what 'burning at the stake' actually means: it's without doubt one of the worst things humans are capable of. In her book *The Burning Time*, Virginia Rounding describes the burnings that took place at Smithfield in London. 'Bundles of brushwood, rods and sticks' were tied together. The victim would be 'bound to the stake by chains'. There were onlookers: 'some sympathizers there to support the victims, others come to enjoy the spectacle – all waiting for the moment when the bodies, charred and melted by the flames, would topple over their chains and into the fire.' It could take a long time. Rounding writes that depending on the weather, on a rainy day the victim might die only after 'an hour of excruciating agony'. While the people around smelled 'the smoke, the scent of roasting human flesh'.

It is true but hard to really accept that the invention of the printing press led to hundreds of years of torture and bloodshed about what seem to many of us now very small doctrinal differences. Like whether the bread and the wine consumed during the Eucharist were *really* the body and blood of Christ or just a *symbol* of the body and blood of Christ. This is still a real difference between Catholics and Protestants.[1] But ways have been found – for the most part – to live and let live. For almost everyone the question about transubstantiation has nothing like that same emotional intensity any more.

Looking back, it is deeply shocking that burning at the stake and other murders and torture happened – not just once, but over and over again – when all participants claimed to be following Jesus of Nazareth, a man who'd said, reported in those printed books: 'love one another'.

I'm using 'burning at the stake' as a shorthand in this book – for all the things people end up doing in the throes of a doctrinal dispute that are really completely against the values they would otherwise claim to hold. They are things that involve turning a living, breathing person into a symbol, something that can be treated with extreme cruelty to make your point. When I talk about 'burning at the stake' I don't mean 'criticizing someone's views in mature debate' or 'protesting against government policies'. I mean the things that demean you as a human if you do them to others. I mean the point when the desire to *just win this argument* turns you into someone who goes against all your other values. There is never a good enough reason to burn someone at the stake.

I think the following is incontestable: trying to get rid of all opinions that are different to yours can only ever be attempted by unthinkably vast human rights atrocities. (And even then it doesn't actually work. There are still, in fact, both Catholics and Protestants.)

And I think we can already see the outlines of how this type of thing becomes more common during an information crisis because we're back in another one. We're all overloaded and overwhelmed by information. If you were born in the 1990s or earlier, the amount of information you can access now in a day compared to when you started secondary school is orders of magnitude larger. We live in a tidal wave of data, coming at us constantly. We don't have the social and informational structures in place yet to manage it.

My suggestion is that this enormous information wave makes us anxious and angry.

How? All this information introduces us to all the things we don't know, all the ways in which we're not experts. We might end up expressing an idea online which we've heard many times in our social circle only to be jumped on by fifty people who know more and tell us that our ideas are stupid, old-fashioned and even prejudiced. If this has ever happened to you – and it's happened to a lot of people – it can make you feel profoundly unsettled, frightened, out of touch. That might be a good thing. It's also an emotionally destabilizing thing. It works the other way around too. When we can see everyone else's opinions, it turns out that someone we really liked may hold an idea that we find stupid, old-fashioned or even prejudiced.

It's the 'I used to like Uncle Bob until I saw his posts on Facebook' syndrome. We're left wondering who we can trust and whether we're actually surrounded by upsetting idiots. This can all leave anyone feeling isolated and misunderstood, unsupported, frightened, worried and angry.

Well, that's probably very much how it felt in Reformation Europe to find out that your next-door neighbour had a very different idea to you about whether the bread and wine of the sacrament were really the body and blood of Christ.

Which is to say: we can expect this to get worse before it gets better.

It's important to explain at this point something that's going to come up again and again: there are two related but distinct changes that happen when these new technologies arise. One is mechanical and the other – the most important one – is psychological.

The mechanical change is quite easy to understand. There are obvious efficiencies of new information technologies which open up time and space for other work and which make things possible that just weren't possible before. If you don't have to memorize enormous amounts of text, you have more time and mental space available for reflecting on it. You just can do certain kinds of work and research much more quickly once writing exists. And again more quickly after printing exists. And much, much more quickly now the internet and indeed generative AI exist.

But I'm most interested in the *psychological* effects. The way the new technologies end up shaping how we think, how we feel, even what we're able to perceive.