The Tipping Point

How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

Malcolm Gladwell
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What is The Tipping Point about?

It's a book about change. In particular, it's a book that presents a new way of understanding why change so often happens as quickly and as unexpectedly as it does. For example, why did crime drop so dramatically in New York City in the mid-1990's? How does a novel written by an unknown author end up as national bestseller? Why do teens smoke in greater and greater numbers, when every single person in the country knows that cigarettes kill? Why is word-of-mouth so powerful? What makes TV shows like Sesame Street so good at teaching kids how to read? I think the answer to all those questions is the same. It's that ideas and behavior and messages and products sometimes behave just like outbreaks of infectious disease. They are social epidemics. The Tipping Point is an examination of the social epidemics that surround us.

2. What does it mean to think about life as an epidemic? Why does thinking in terms of epidemics change the way we view the world?

Because epidemics behave in a very unusual and counterintuitive way. Think, for a moment, about an epidemic of measles in a kindergarten class. One child brings in the virus. It spreads to every other child in the class in a matter of days. And then, within a week or so, it completely dies out and none of the children will ever get measles again. That's typical behavior for epidemics: they can blow up and then die out really quickly, and even the smallest change -- like one child with a virus -- can get them started. My argument is that it is also the way that change often happens in the rest of the world. Things can happen all at once, and little changes can make a huge difference. That's a little bit counterintuitive. As human beings, we always expect everyday change to happen slowly and steadily, and for there to be some relationship between cause and effect. And when there isn't -- when crime drops dramatically in New York for no apparent reason, or when a movie made on a shoestring budget ends up making hundreds of millions of dollars -- we're surprised. I'm saying, don't be surprised. This is the way social epidemics work.

3. Where did you get the idea for the book?

Before I went to work for The New Yorker, I was a reporter for the Washington Post and I covered the AIDS epidemic. And one of the things that struck me as I learned more and more about HIV was how strange epidemics were. If you talk to the people who study epidemics--epidemiologists--you realize that they have a strikingly different way of looking at the world. They don't share the assumptions the rest of us have about how and why change happens. The word "Tipping Point", for example, comes from the world of epidemiology. It's the name given to that moment in an epidemic when a virus reaches
critical mass. It's the boiling point. It's the moment on the graph when the line starts to
shoot straight upwards. AIDS tipped in 1982, when it went from a rare disease affecting a
few gay men to a worldwide epidemic. Crime in New York City tipped in the mid 1990's,
when the murder rate suddenly plummeted. When I heard that phrase for the first time I
remember thinking--wow. What if everything has a Tipping Point? Wouldn't it be cool to
try and look for Tipping Points in business, or in social policy, or in advertising or in any
number of other nonmedical areas?

4. Why do you think the epidemic example is so relevant for other kinds of change?
Is it just that it's an unusual and interesting way to think about the world?

No. I think it's much more than that, because once you start to understand this pattern you
start to see it everywhere. I'm convinced that ideas and behaviors and new products move
through a population very much like a disease does. This isn't just a metaphor, in other
words. I'm talking about a very literal analogy. One of the things I explore in the book is
that ideas can be contagious in exactly the same way that a virus is. One chapter, for
example, deals with the very strange epidemic of teenage suicide in the South Pacific
islands of Micronesia. In the 1970's and 1980's, Micronesia had teen suicide rates ten
times higher than anywhere else in the world. Teenagers were literally being infected
with the suicide bug, and one after another they were killing themselves in exactly the
same way under exactly the same circumstances. We like to use words like
contagiousness and infectiousness just to apply to the medical realm. But I assure you
that after you read about what happened in Micronesia you'll be convinced that behavior
can be transmitted from one person to another as easily as the flu or the measles can. In
fact, I don't think you have to go to Micronesia to see this pattern in action. Isn't this the
explanation for the current epidemic of teen smoking in this country? And what about the
rash of mass shootings we're facing at the moment--from Columbine through the Atlanta
stockbroker through the neo-Nazi in Los Angeles?

5. Are you talking about the idea of memes, that has become so popular in academic
circles recently?

It's very similar. A meme is a idea that behaves like a virus--that moves through a
population, taking hold in each person it infects. I must say, though, that I don't much like
that term. The thing that bothers me about the discussion of memes is that no one ever
tries to define exactly what they are, and what makes a meme so contagious. I mean, you
can put a virus under a microscope and point to all the genes on its surface that are
responsible for making it so dangerous. So what happens when you look at an infectious
idea under a microscope? I have a chapter where I try to do that. I use the example of
children's television shows like Sesame Street and the new Nickelodeon program called
Blues Clues. Both those are examples of shows that started learning epidemics in
preschoolers, that turned kids onto reading and "infected" them with literacy. We
sometimes think of Sesame Street as purely the result of the creative genius of people like
Jim Henson and Frank Oz. But the truth is that it is carefully and painstaking engineered,
down to the smallest details. There's a wonderful story, in fact, about the particular
scientific reason for the creation of Big Bird. It's very funny. But I won't spoil it for you.
6. How would you classify *The Tipping Point*? Is it a science book?

I like to think of it as an intellectual adventure story. It draws from psychology and sociology and epidemiology, and uses examples from the worlds of business and education and fashion and media. If I had to draw an analogy to another book, I'd say it was like Daniel Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence*, in the sense that it takes theories and ideas from the social sciences and shows how they can have real relevance to our lives. There's a whole section of the book devoted to explaining the phenomenon of word of mouth, for example. I think that word of mouth is something created by three very rare and special psychological types, whom I call Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen. I profile three people who I think embody those types, and then I use the example of Paul Revere and his midnight ride to point out the subtle characteristics of this kind of social epidemic. So just in that chapter there is a little bit of sociology, a little of psychology and a little bit of history, all in aid of explaining a very common but mysterious phenomenon that we deal with every day. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm not sure that this book fits into any one category. That's why I call it an adventure story. I think it will appeal to anyone who wants to understand the world around them in a different way. I think it can give the reader an advantage--a new set of tools. Of course, I also think they'll be in for a very fun ride.

7. What do you hope readers will take away from the book?

One of the things I'd like to do is to show people how to start "positive" epidemics of their own. The virtue of an epidemic, after all, is that just a little input is enough to get it started, and it can spread very, very quickly. That makes it something of obvious and enormous interest to everyone from educators trying to reach students, to businesses trying to spread the word about their product, or for that matter to anyone who's trying to create a change with limited resources. The book has a number of case studies of people who have successfully started epidemics--an advertising agency, for example, and a breast cancer activist. I think they are really fascinating. I also take a pressing social issue, teenage smoking, and break it down and analyze what an epidemic approach to solving that problem would look like. The point is that by the end of the book I think the reader will have a clear idea of what starting an epidemic actually takes. This is not an abstract, academic book. It's very practical. And it's very hopeful. It's brain software.

Beyond that, I think that *The Tipping Point* is a way of making sense of the world, because I'm not sure that the world always makes as much sense to us as we would hope. I spent a great deal of time in the book talking about the way our minds work--and the peculiar and sometimes problematic ways in which our brains process information. Our intuitions, as humans, aren't always very good. Changes that happen really suddenly, on the strength of the most minor of input, can be deeply confusing. People who understand *The Tipping Point*, I think, have a way of decoding the world around them.
Reading Guide

Introduction

1. The Tipping Point is that magic moment when an idea, trend or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. At what point does it become obvious that something has reached a boiling point and is about to tip?

2. The possibility of sudden change is at the center of the idea of the Tipping Point -- big changes occurring as a result of small events. If we agree that we are all, at heart, gradualists, our expectations set by the steady passage of time, is it reassuring to think that we can predict radical change by pinning their tipping points? Can we really ensure that the unexpected becomes the expected?

CHAPTER ONE: The Three Rules of Epidemics

The Law of the Few:

3. The 80/20 Principle states that in any situation roughly 80 percent of the 'work' will be done by 20 percent of the participants. This idea is central to the Law of the Few theory where a tiny percentage of people do the majority of work. But say you took those 20 people who do all the "work" away, would changes or epidemics never occur or would the next 20 people step into that role and assume the position of "workers"? Is one born an exceptional person, a 'one of the few,' or could someone eventually learn how to become a member of this exceptional group?

Stickiness Factor:

4. Stickiness means that a message makes an impact and doesn't go in one ear and out the other. Take a simple, every day example of this. Think about a song that you couldn't get out of your head or that television commercial you still remember from when you were a kid. Could you pinpoint what it is you think makes them "sticky?"

The Power of Context:

5. This says that human beings are a lot more sensitive to their environment than they may seem. How attuned are you to your environment and its effect on you? Have you felt your mood change because of the surroundings even if it's as subtle as standing near a couple in a bitter argument or being in a cluttered, messy bedroom?

CHAPTER TWO: The Law of the Few

6. Would you rather see a film, eat at a restaurant or shop at a store on hearing from a friend that it's good or do you prefer to go in 'blind' with no expectations? Is the word-of-mouth phenomenon a strictly organic process or can it be manipulated? By this, I mean, do products circulate via word-of-mouth solely based on their merit and impact on the
consumer or is it possible for marketers to create buzz from people paid to do so? Would this work or would this fail as soon as the 'word' got beyond the 'fixed' transmitters?

7. Connectors -- the kinds of people who know everyone and possess special gifts for bringing the world together. What kind of careers and job titles would you expect Connectors to have? Connectors are defined by having many acquaintances, a sign of social power, but do you think a Connector privileges quantity over quality? How do Connectors embody the maxim "it's not what you know but who you know?"

8. Maven -- means one who accumulates knowledge and who has information on a lot of different products or prices or places. Could anyone be a maven if they just have the diligence and desire to learn a specific craft or area of knowledge?

9. Salesmen -- are the select group of people with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing. Discuss what you think makes a good salesman? Think about the last time you were in a store and what you liked or didn't like about the retail person assisting you? Have you ever felt suckerized into buying something or recognized the only reason you bought an item (or even one in ever color) was because of the person selling it to you?

10. What happens when two people talk? They engage in a kind of dance. Their volume and pitch fall into balance and they fall into physical and conversational harmony? So, when we 'click' with someone, is this harmony immediately established without effort or can it be created and fine-tuned with practice or over time? Is it this synchronicity that leads to attraction? Does the way people 'dance' with each other indicate the presence of chemistry?

11. What would you describe yourself as -- a connecter, maven or salesman? Think of the people you know and who out of them best exemplifies these categories and why.

CHAPTER THREE: The Stickiness Factor

12. Sesame Street was an example of how an agent of infection (television) was able to infect a positive virus (literacy). What are some other examples of sticky messages that aren't as beneficial in culture?

13. What makes a message memorable? What about the commercial we dislike and we only recall because it irritated us so intensely? Haven't the advertisers fulfilled their purpose by the sheer fact you remember their commercial? Does this mean that the cliché "even bad publicity is good publicity" is right? If something gets noticed and sticks in the viewer's mind then does the nature of the message not matter?

14. We have become, in our society, overwhelmed by people clamoring for our attention. This information age has created a stickiness problem. Has the excessive amount of choice proved counter-productive for American consumerism? For instance, walking down the cereal aisle at the supermarket do you:
A) Buy way more than you need after spotting 3 new attractive, discounted products.

B) Head straight to your regular brand, walking out with the same cereal you have had since you were a kid.

C) Become paralyzed with indecision and leave after 2 hours with a loaf of bread?

15. What are some of the desperate measures taken by advertisers, publicists and celebrities to get noticed and stay in the limelight? How has the level of shock tactics used to grab public attention escalated and changed over time? Do we risk become totally desensitized as a culture, immune to the eyebrow-raising, attention-grabbing ploys of marketers?

16. Do you think that children's television shows like Sesame Street and Blues Clues are more educational and 'stickier' than books?

CHAPTER FOUR: The Power of Context (Part One)

17. Is Bernie Goetz a cold-blooded murderer or a heroic vigilante?

18. The Power of context infers that epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur. Are certain individuals more sensitive to their environment than others? Think of examples of behavior as a function of social context. How often or to what extent does the environment dictate your behavior i.e. your conduct when at the opera versus being at a baseball game?

19. The Broken Windows Theory argues that crime is the inevitable result of disorder. It suggests that crime is contagious. Do you agree or do you think this risks excusing a criminal's culpability?

20. Most conservative theories say that the criminal is a personality type whereas the Broken Windows theory and Power of Context suggest the opposite -- the criminal is actually someone acutely sensitive to his environment and who is prompted to commit crimes based on his perceptions of the world around him. Which theory do you believe?

21. With the subway example, the problem of farebeating snowballed because people joined in after watching others do it. Are humans instinctively conformists who mimic the behavior they see around them?

22. The experiment led by Zimbardo, where they looked at why prisons are such nasty places, they showed that specific situations are so powerful that they overwhelm our inherent predispositions. If we improved the living conditions in prisons, do you believe it could impact on inmates' behavior?

23. How does one explain certain exceptional figures like Gandhi and Mandela who were subject to the most brutal and atrocious conditions yet immersed seemingly uncorrupted?
24. The essence of the Power of Context is that our inner states are the result of our outer circumstances. But then, how does this work with or against the idea that our inner states ultimately create our outer world -- that perception is reality or that if we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change?

CHAPTER FIVE: The Power of Context (Part Two)

25. The Ya-Ya Sisterhood epidemic reveals the critical role that groups play in social epidemics. Psychologists tell us much the same thing: that when people are asked to consider evidence or make decisions in a group, they come to very different conclusions than when they are asked the same questions by themselves. Can we ever really make a decision in a vacuum, solely based on our own feelings, or do our peers or surroundings always influence us somehow?

26. The Rule of 150 suggests that the size of the group is another one of those subtle contextual factors that can make a big difference. Groups under the size of 150 are more effective as they can exploit the bonds of memory and peer pressure. Is there a particular group or organization that you consider successful and if so, what do you think makes them so effective?

27. If peer pressure is more powerful than the concept of a boss would you work harder for a boss whom you are friendly with because you care more what they think?

CHAPTER SIX: Case Study: Rumors, Sneakers and the Power of Translation

28. Do you believe that it was essentially the 'cool' marketing campaign that tipped the Airwalk trend? Can you think of other more current products that have exploded onto the market with an equally impressive advertising assault? Would Apple computers and the iPod phenomenon, for example, be as popular if it didn't have its signature marketing campaign?

29. All kinds of high-tech products fail, never making it beyond the Early Adopters, because companies fail to transform an idea that makes perfect sense to an Early Adopter to one that makes perfect sense to a member of the Early Majority. Do you know of any examples of products or ideas that looked like they had great potential but never seemed to make it to the mainstream?

30. How do weird, idiosyncratic things that really cool kids do end up in the mainstream? They are translated from a highly specialized world into a language the rest of us can understand. So, when we judge things as being weird and idiosyncratic are we really saying that we just don't understand it? It's not the product but our interpretation of it that is limited? Could everything, if 'sugarcoated' in a way we recognize, ultimately, become palatable and even enjoyable?
CHAPTER SEVEN: Case Study: Suicide, Smoking and the Search for the Unsticky Cigarette

31. The epidemics of suicide and smoking are complex and largely unconscious contagions with far more subtle undercurrents at work. One explanation beyond rationale is that as humans we get permission to act by seeing others engage in deviant acts. When we engage in dangerous or reckless behavior of any kind, how much of our decision to do so is conscious versus unintentional?

32. Are you a smoker or have you ever been? What do you think makes some people pick up the habit while others steer clear of it their whole lives?

33. What are your opinions on the nature vs. nurture debate? Do you agree that environment plays a bigger role in shaping and influence children than genetics and personality?

34. "Telling teenagers about the health risks of smoking -- it will make you wrinkled! It will make you impotent! It will make you dead! -- is useless," says Judith Harris. Is this morally incomprehensible advice or the sad truth? What do you think about the psychologist David Rowe's theory that "the role of parents is a passive -- providing a set of genes at loci relevant to smoking risk, but not socially influencing their offspring?" Should parents spend more time trying to monitor and shape their children's peer group than correcting and disciplining them in the home?

35. Do you agree that instead of fighting experimentation, which is a natural and unavoidable fate of growing up, we should be rather focusing on diminishing the consequences of that experimentation? For example instead of forbidding your child from consuming alcohol when he goes out or proselytizing about the dangers of under-age drinking, should parents rather ensure there is a sober, designated driver at one of their parties? What other examples can you come up with based in this approach.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Conclusion

36. What underlies successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus. Can leopards really change their spots and do you agree that it only takes the smallest infractions to cause the greatest changes? With the slightest push in the right place, can the world around us be tipped?
Biography

Malcolm Gladwell has been a staff writer with The New Yorker magazine since 1996. His 1999 profile of Ron Popeil won a National Magazine Award, and in 2005 he was named one of Time Magazine's 100 Most Influential People. He is the author of two books, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference," (2000) and "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking" (2005), both of which were number one New York Times bestsellers.

From 1987 to 1996, he was a reporter with the Washington Post, where he covered business, science, and then served as the newspaper's New York City bureau chief. He graduated from the University of Toronto, Trinity College, with a degree in history. He was born in England, grew up in rural Ontario, and now lives in New York City.