Revenge of the Tipping Point

By Malcolm Gladwell (2024)

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- Twenty-five years ago, in *The Tipping Poin*t, I (author) was fascinated by the idea that in social epidemics little things could make a big difference. (p.7)
- (In *The Tipping Point*) I came up with rules to describe the internal workings of social contagions: (p.7)
    - The Law of the Few
    - The Power of Context
    - The Stickiness Factor
- The laws of epidemics, I argued, could be used to promote positive change: (p.7)
    - Lower crime rates
    - Teach kids how to read
    - Curb cigarette smoking
- In *Revenge of the Tipping Point*, I want to look at the underside of the possibilities I explored so long ago. (p.7)
    - If the world can be moved by just the slightest push, then the person who knows where and when to push has real power. (p.7)
    - *Revenge of the Tipping Point* is an attempt to do a forensic investigation of social epidemics. (p.7)

PART ONE: THREE PUZZLES

CHAPTER ONE - Casper and C-Dog

- Social epidemics are propelled by the efforts of an exceptional few — people who play outsize social roles. (p.22)
- In epidemiology there is a term called the “index case,” which refers to the person who kicks off an epidemic. (p.26)
- An epidemic, by definition, is a contagious phenomenon that does not respect borders. (p.27)
    - Physician John Wennberg called what he had discovered “small-area variation.” (p.30)
        - How your doctor treats you, in many cases, has less to do with where your doctor was trained, or how well he or she did in medical school, or what kind of personality your doctor has, than with where your doctor lives. (p.30-31)
        - Small area variation does not result from what patients want their doctors to do, it stems from what *doctors want to do to their patients*. (p.31)
- This is the first lesson of social epidemics. (p.36)
    - When we look at a contagious event, we assume that there is something fundamentally wild and unruly about the path it takes. (p.36)
- Whatever contagious belief unites the people in those instances has the discipline to stop at the borders of their community. (p.36)
    - There must be a set of rules, buried somewhere below the surface. (p.36)

CHAPTER TWO - The Trouble with Miami

- This isn’t really about learning about what works, it’s more about the influences of your environment. (p.51)
- An overstory is the upper layer of foliage in a forest, and the size and density and height of the overstory affect the behavior and development of every species far below on the forest floor. (p.51)

CHAPTER THREE - Poplar Grove

- We have, so far, explored the idea that social epidemics are not wild and out of control. (p.78)
    - They attach themselves to places. (p.78)
        - And the saga of Philip Esformes and Miami (Medicare fraud) tells us that the power of places comes from the stories that communities tell themselves. (p.78)
- If epidemics are influenced by the overstories created by the inhabitants of a community, then in what sense are communities *responsible* for the fevers and contagions that plague them? (p.78)
- The word used by biologists to describe an environment where individual differences have been sanded down and every organism follows the same path of development is *monoculture*. (p.82)
    - Monocultures are rare; the default state for most natural systems is diversity. (p.82)
    - A monoculture typically emerges only when something happens, deliberate or otherwise, to upset the natural order. (p.82)
    - Epidemics *love* monocultures. (p.82)
- What you give up in a world of uniformity is resilience. (p.89)
    - A monoculture offers no internal defenses against an outside threat. (p.89)
    - Once the infection is inside the walls, there is nothing to stop it. (p.89)
- The best solution to a monoculture epidemic is to break up the monoculture. (p.100)
- In medicine there is a term for the kind of illness that is caused by the intervention of doctors: *iatrogenesis*. (p.101)
    - You treat someone with a drug, and the side effects turn out to be worse than the disease. (p.101)
    - You do a minor operation, and the patient dies of complications. (p.101)

PART TWO: THE SOCIAL ENGINEERS

CHAPTER FOUR - The Magic Third

- The tipping point was a threshold: the moment when something that had seemed immovable — that had been one way for generations — transformed overnight into something else. (p.111)
- People, it is clear, behave very differently in a group above some mysterious point of critical mass than they do in a group just a little below that point.
    - So, what if you knew exactly where that magical point was? (p.111)
    - Or — better yet — what if you had a way to manipulate the size of a group so that it was either just below the tipping point or just above it? (p.111)
- Miami and Poplar Grove are places that unintentionally opened the door to an epidemic. (p.111)
    - I'm talking here about taking things one step further: intentionally orchestrating the course of contagious behavior. (p.111)
    - The truth is that all kinds of people engage in this kind of social engineering — and they aren't always honest about what they are doing. (p.111)
- The pioneer in thinking about the implications of tipping points was a sociologist named Rosabeth Moss Kanter. (p.111)
- Ursula Burns went to college, earned an engineering degree, took a job at the fabled technology company Xerox, and in 2009 was named CEO — the first African American woman to run a Fortune 500 company. (p.115)
    - By labeling her as exceptional, as some kind of singular genius, her colleagues didn't have to revisit their ideas about what women — and, in particular, black women — were capable of. (p.116)
    - They could keep their belief systems intact. (p.116)
- In the end, nearly everyone was in agreement (to stay in their home or sell - i.e., "white flight"). (p.121)

    - Something dramatic happened when a once-insignificant set of outsiders reached between one-quarter and one-third of the population of whatever group they were joining. (p.121)
    - Let's pick the highest end of this range and call this the Magic Third. (p.121)
- It was just like Kanter predicted - When a woman is all alone she stands out as a woman, but she becomes invisible as a person. (p.123)
    - The magic seems to occur when three or more women serve on a board together. (p.123)
- One of the best pieces of evidence for this comes from the work of Damon Centola, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, in his (assign a name to a photograph experiment). (p.125)
    - "As soon as there's something that works, you're likely to just keep typing Jeff, Jeff, Jeff, Jeff," because it is the greatest likelihood that you'll experience success. (p.126)
    - Centola ran this game over and over again, and always got the same result - The majority's consensus fell apart when the number of outsiders reached 25 percent. (p.127)
    - In Centola's laboratory version of reality, he ended up on the low end of the tipping-point range. (p.127)
        - He found the Magic Quarter! (p.127)
- Lawrence Tract Experiment: If there really is a dramatic shift for the worse, right around a specific number, then you have to make absolutely sure you never reach that number. (p.133)

CHAPTER FIVE - The Mysterious Case of the Harvard Women's Rugby Team

- In her famous essay on her consulting experience, Rosabeth Kanter called a group where the minority numbered below 15 percent skewed: (p.150)
    - Skewed groups are those in which there is a large preponderance of one type over another, up to a ratio of perhaps 85:15. (p.150)
    - The numerically dominant types also control the group and its culture in enough ways to be labeled " dominants." (p.150)
    - The few of another type in a skewed group can appropriately be called "tokens," because they are often treated as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals. (p.150)

CHAPTER SIX - Mr. Index and the Marriott Outbreak

- We have looked, so far, at two elements of epidemics. (p.179)
    - The first is the overstory.
        - The overstory casts a shadow over whatever is happening on the ground.
    - The second element is group proportions.
        - The mix of people in a group determines when and if that group tips.
- Both of those elements were on display in the Poplar Grove suicide epidemic. (p.180)
    - Poplar Grove has its own particular overstory—an extreme ethic of achievement—that had devastating side effects. (p.180)
    - And its group proportions were all wrong. It was a monoculture. (p.180)
    - But there was a third factor. (p.180)
        - One of the engines of the Poplar Grove epidemic was that the students who started the school's suicide cluster had special status: They occupied a significant position in the school's hierarchy.
        - I talked about this idea in *The Tipping Point* - I called it the Law of the Few.
- Many of the social problems we deal with are profoundly asymmetrical — meaning that a small number do all the " work." And when I say small, I mean really, really small. (p.180)

- Moving from the position that a problem belongs to all of us to the position that a problem is being caused by a few of us is *really difficult*. (p.183-184)
    - What if the only way to save a community devoted to helping black people is to turn black people away? (p.184)
    - Harvard's rugby team is an example of a second kind of social-engineering problem: What do we do when institutions quietly manipulate their numbers in order to sustain the privilege of a few? (p.184)
- But here I want to describe an even more daunting problem that is very much in our future. (p.184)
    - Technology is going to give us the ability to figure out who the special few are — not just on roadsides in Denver but in all kinds of places, including big hotel conference rooms at the outset of a pandemic. (p.184)
- There are tens of thousands of academic journals in the world, which gives you a sense of just how splintered science has become. (p.184)
    - Sometimes these various fields speak to each other and read each other's work. (p.180)
    - More often they do not, and what goes on in one corner can go unnoticed by the scientists who work in another. (p.184-185)
- What if age and obesity really *are* the two biggest predictors of superspreading? (p.196)
    - Does that mean in the middle of a pandemic passengers will refuse to sit beside an overweight person on a plane? (p.196)

PART THREE: THE OVERSTORY

CHAPTER SEVEN - The L.A. Survivors' Club

- Overstories can hover over entire cultures and countries. (p.209)
- This kind of overstory is closer in meaning to what the Germans call the *Zeitgeist*, which translates literally as time-spirit. (p.209)
    - Zeitgeist overstories are wider and higher. (p.209)
- Liberals, moderates, and conservatives, in most cases, disagreed strongly on hot-button issues *only if they didn't watch a lot of television*. (p.224)
    - But the more television people of all ideological persuasions watched, the more they started to agree. (p.224)
    - When a large group of people watch the same stories, night after night, it brings them together. (p.224)
- The overstory held by the survivors: That what had happened in the camps was too overwhelming, too far outside even the most extravagant imagining of horror, and that the only emotional path available was forward. (p.227)
    - At the same time, those who hadn't gone through the experience had their own overstory. (p.227)

CHAPTER EIGHT - Doing Time on Maple Drive

- There is something about a revolution—large or small—that baffles us: when a group of people come together, in a fever, and abruptly change the way they behave or what they believe, we are suddenly at a loss for words or understanding. (p.236)
    - Overstories are far more volatile than they appear. (p.236)
    - We miss the signs of change because we are looking for them in the wrong places. (p.236)
- I described the work of USC scholar Larry Gross, and I think it's worth repeating something Gross said:
    - "It's not the media pushing this button to get that effect. (p.244)

    - It's the media creating the cultural consciousness about how the world works… and what the rules are," (p.244-245)
    - And up in the overstory, these kinds of rules are constantly being rewritten and revised. (p.245)
- The power of television isn't telling us *what* to think - It's telling us *how* to think (the implicit rules). (p.245)
- But the change isn't gradual. (p.255)
    - It wasn't that you had some defectors at 20 percent, then a few more at 22 percent, and finally at 25 percent you got everyone. (p.255)
    - Nothing happened until you got to 25 percent — and then everything happened. (p.255)
- Think about the psychology of that kind of change. (p.255)
    - "If you're just below that tipping point — you're at 20 percent — you have no idea how close you are." (p.255)
- If change happened gradually, you could see that you were getting closer and closer to your goal — and you wouldn't be surprised when you reached it. (p.255)
    - But if nothing happens and then everything happens, you are in the strange position of being discouraged during the long stretch when nothing is happening and stunned at the point when it all shifts. (p.255)

PART FOUR: CONCLUSION

CHAPTER NINE - Overstories, Superspreaders, and Group Proportions

- In Poplar Grove, the overstory arose from years of upper-middle-class parents pushing their kids to succeed. (p.272)
- Miami became Miami because of an extraordinary confluence of events at the end of the 1970s: the influx of Cuban refugees, the rise of the cocaine trade, and a race riot. (p.272)
- When it came to our understanding of the Holocaust, a television miniseries seems to have played an enormous role. (p.272)
- That's the nature of an overstory: Most of us don't bother to look up at the ideas circulating above in the forest canopy. (p.277)
- But if you visited them (superspreader physicians) twice a month — month in, month out — what happened? (p.292)
    - The number of prescriptions they wrote leaped. (p.292-293)
    - Twenty-four visits a year was the tipping point. (p.292)
- Purdue Pharmaceuticals fueled an epidemic that would end up consuming the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans based on the seduction of no more than a few thousand doctors concentrated in a handful of states. (p.294)
- The great lesson of COVID is that when it comes to an airborne virus, an epidemic doesn't need a lot of recruits. (p.294)
    - It just needs a single superspreader, armed with some rare physiological properties, to stand at the front of a room. (p.294)
    - The lesson of the opioid crisis is exactly the same. (p.294)
- Because a tiny fraction of doctors was not so thoughtful. (p.295)
    - And that tiny fraction was enough to kick-start the epidemic. (p.295)
    - Once again we are well beyond the Law of the Few here - This is the Law of the Very, Very, Very Few. (p.295)
- What do we know from the Lawrence Tract and Harvard's long history and the work of scholars such as Rosabeth Kanter and Damon Centola? (p.297)

    - That epidemics are acutely sensitive to shifts in group proportions. (p.297)
- The Lawrence Tract wanted to fight white flight. (p.300)
    - But that meant they had to deny a dwelling place to a black family. (p.300)
- Superspreaders disproportionately drive the course of diseases like COVID. (p.300)
    - But acting on that fact requires that we single out a small minority of people. (p.300)
- The opioid dilemma, however, was even harder. (p.300-303)
    - A little company in Connecticut decided to reinvigorate one of the hoariest of the poppy's gifts to humanity.
    - But enough states were still under the Madden overstory that the United States was spared a truly national epidemic.
    - Instead, the army of OxyContin sales representatives descended on the non-triplicate states, and the US got small-area variation.
    - Then McKinsey came in and refocused Purdue's marketing toward the superspreaders.
    - The Purdue sales reps told the Core and the Super Core doctors that when it came to OxyContin, addiction was rare, and that patients could tolerate high doses for weeks on end.
        - Of course that wasn't true.
    - But the standards of evidence necessary for convincing Deciles 1 through 7 weren't nearly as rigorous with the Core and the Super Core physicians.
    - The likes of Michael Rhodes weren't fact-checking the claims of their favorite sales rep with the Journal of the American Medical Association.
    - So OxyContin got an extra decade of life.
    - Many more patients became addicted.
    - On the street it was known as the "Rolls Royce" of opioids, because it produced such a smooth high.
    - Purdue pushed harder.
    - The Core and Super Core responded.
    - OxyContin sales hit $ 3 billion a year.
    - Then came reformulation, making the pill all but impossible to crush and snort, as users had been doing for a decade.
    - So the people who had been addicted to OxyContin switched to heroin.
    - Then they switched from heroin to fentanyl.
    - And finally they shifted from fentanyl to some combination of all of the above, mixed in with tranquilizers and veterinary drugs and whatever else was at hand.
    - By the early 2020s, the opioid epidemic that had begun back in 1996 with the introduction of OxyContin was claiming the lives of almost 80,000 Americans a year.
- Epidemics: (p.304)
    - Have rules.
    - They have boundaries.
    - They are subject to overstories — and we are the ones who create overstories.
    - They change in size and shape when they reach a tipping point — and it is possible to know when and where those tipping points are.
    - They are driven by a number of people, and those people can be identified.
    - The tools necessary to control an epidemic are sitting on the table, right in front of us.
        - We can let the unscrupulous take them.
        - Or we can pick them up ourselves, and use them to build a better world.