

REVENGE OF THE TIPPING POINT



Overstories,

Superspreaders, and

the Rise of Social

Engineering

MALCOLM GLADWELL

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ALSO BY MALCOLM GLADWELL

The Bomber Mafia

Talking to Strangers

David and Goliath

What the Dog Saw

Outliers

Blink

The Tipping Point

Revenge of the Tipping Point

OVERSTORIES, SUPERSPREADERS, AND
THE RISE OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING

Malcolm
Gladwell



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author's Note

Twenty-five years ago, I published my first book. It was entitled *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make a Big Difference*.

Back then I had a little apartment in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, and I would sit at my desk, with a glimpse of the Hudson River off in the distance, and write in the mornings before I headed to work. Because I had never written a book, I had no clear idea how to do it. I wrote with that mix of self-doubt and euphoria common to every first-time author

“*The Tipping Point* is the biography of an idea,” I began, “and the idea is very simple.

It is that the best way to understand the emergence of fashion trends, the ebb and flow of crime waves, or, for that matter, the transformation of unknown books into bestsellers, or the rise of teenage smoking, or the phenomena of word of mouth, or any number of the other mysterious changes that mark everyday life is to think of them as epidemics. Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do.

The book was published in the spring of 2000, and the first stop on my book tour was a reading at a small independent bookstore in Los Angeles. Two people came, a stranger and the mother of a friend of mine—but not my friend. (I have forgiven her.) I said to myself, *Well, I guess that's it*. But it wasn't! *The Tipping Point* grew like the epidemics it described—at first gradually, then all in a rush. By the time the paperback came out, it had entered the zeitgeist. The book spent several years on the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Bill Clinton referred to it as “that book everyone has been

talking about.” The phrase *tipping point* became part of the vernacular. I used to joke that those words would be written on my tombstone.

Do I know why *The Tipping Point* touched such a chord? Not really. But if I had to guess, I would say that it was because it was a hopeful book that matched the mood of a hopeful time. The year 2000 was an optimistic time. The new millennium had arrived. Crime and social problems were in freefall. The Cold War was over. I offered in my book a recipe for how to promote positive change—as the subtitle suggested, to find a way for little things to make a big difference.

Twenty-five years is a long time. Think about how different you are today than you were a quarter-century ago. Our opinions change. Our tastes change. We care more about some things and less about others. Over the years, I would sometimes look back on what I had written in *The Tipping Point* and wonder how I ever came to write the things I did. An entire chapter on the children’s television shows *Sesame Street* and *Blue’s Clues*? Where did that come from? I didn’t even have children back then.

I moved on to write *Blink*, *Outliers*, *David and Goliath*, *Talking to Strangers*, and *The Bomber Mafia*. I started the podcast *Revisionist History*. I settled down with the woman I love. I had two children and buried my father and took up running again and cut my hair. I sold the Chelsea apartment. I moved out of the city. A friend and I started an audio company called Pushkin Industries. I got a cat and named him Biggie Smalls.

You know the feeling of looking at a picture of yourself from long ago? When I do that, I have difficulty recognizing the person in the photograph. And so I thought it might be interesting to revisit *The Tipping Point*, on the occasion of its twenty-fifth birthday, to reexamine what I wrote so long ago through a very different set of eyes: In *The Tipping Point 2.0*, a writer would return to the scene of his first, youthful success.

But then, as I immersed myself once again in the world of social epidemics, I realized that I didn’t want to return to the same ground I had covered in *The Tipping Point*. The world seemed very different to my eyes. In *The Tipping Point*, I introduced a series of principles to help us make

sense of the kinds of sudden shifts in behavior and belief that make up our world. I still consider those ideas useful. But now I have different questions. And I find that I still do not understand many things about social epidemics.

I had not reread *The Tipping Point* in the years since its publication, and when I finally did, in preparation for this project, I stopped every few pages to ask, *What about this? How could I have left out that?* In some far corner of my mind, I discovered, I had never stopped arguing with myself about how best to explain and understand tipping points and their many mysteries.

And so I began again, with a fresh sheet of paper. And *Revenge of the Tipping Point* is the result: a new set of theories, stories, and arguments about the strange pathways that ideas and behavior follow through our world.

Revenge
of the
Tipping Point

INTRODUCTION

The Passive Voice

“HAS ALSO BEEN ASSOCIATED...”

1.

Chairwoman: I’d like to ask you one final question, and I’d like to begin with you, Dr. _____. Will you apologize to the American people...?

A group of politicians has called a hearing to discuss an epidemic. Three witnesses have been subpoenaed. It’s the height of the pandemic. The meeting is virtual. Everyone is at home, in front of bookcases and kitchen cabinets. We’re an hour into the proceedings. I’m leaving out all the identifying details for the moment because I want to focus exclusively on what was *said*: the words that were used, and the intentions behind them.

Witness #1: I would be happy to apologize to the American people for all of the pain they have suffered and for the tragedies that they’ve experienced in their families and—and I thought I did that earlier in my opening comments. That was my intention.

Witness #1 is in her seventies. Short, white hair. Dressed in black. At the beginning, she seemed to struggle with how to work the Mute button. She still seems flustered. She isn’t used to this. She comes from a world of privilege. Being confronted over her own behavior is clearly not something that has happened in her life with any frequency. Her tasteful glasses look like they might slide off the end of her nose.

Witness #1: I also am very angry. I'm angry that some people working at _____ broke the law. I'm angry about it from 2007, and I'm angry about it now again in 2020. It's—it's—I think that—

Chairwoman: I know you're angry. And I'm sorry, but that's not the apology we were looking for. You've apologized for the pain people have suffered, but you've never apologized for the role that you played in the _____ crisis.

So, I'll ask you again, will you apologize for the role you played in the _____ crisis?

Witness #1: I have struggled with that question. I have asked myself over many years. I have tried to figure out, was—is there anything that I could have done differently, knowing what I knew then, not what I know now. And I have to say, I can't—there's nothing that I can find that I would have done differently, based on what I believed and understood then and what I learned from management in the reports to the board and what I learned from my colleagues on the board. And it is extremely distressing. And it's—

The chairwoman turns to Witness #2. He's the cousin of the woman in black: a young man, well-manicured, in a suit and tie.

Chairwoman: Mr. _____, will you apologize for the role that you played...?

Witness #2: I echo much of what my cousin said.

Does anyone expect the witnesses to admit that they started an epidemic? Probably not. A squadron of lawyers has clearly coached them beforehand in the art of self-preservation. The righteousness with which they deny responsibility, however, suggests another possibility: that they have not yet accepted their own culpability, or that they started something that spiraled out of control in a way they could not understand.

An hour later comes the crucial moment. Another member of the investigating committee—let's call him the politician—turns to Witness #3:

Politician: Dr. _____, has any executive in the _____ company ever spent a day in jail for the actions of the corporation?

Witness #3: I believe not.

None of the witnesses hold themselves responsible. But apparently no one else does either.

Politician: Madam Chair, it's easy to feel outrage about the misdeeds of this corporation, but what about our government that gives license to this kind of corporate irresponsibility and criminality and impunity?

The politician turns to Witness #2, the young man. His family's company has just reached an agreement with the government to settle a series of criminal charges. He had once sat on the board of directors and is the heir apparent to the empire.

Politician #1: Mr. _____, as part of the DOJ settlement, did you have to admit any wrongdoing or liability or responsibility for causing America's crisis of _____?

Witness #2: No, we did not.

Politician #1: Were you interviewed by the Department of Justice, as part of this investigation, about your role in these events?

Witness #2: No.

Politician #1: Do you take any responsibility for causing America's nightmarish experience with the _____ crisis?

Witness #2: Well, though I believe the full record, which has not been publicly released yet, will show that the family and the board acted legally and ethically, I take a deep moral responsibility for it, because I believe our product, _____, despite our best intentions and best efforts, has been associated with abuse and addiction, and—

Has been associated.

Politician #2: You're using the passive voice there when you say it's "been associated with abuse," which implies somehow you and your family were not aware of exactly what was taking place...

If you listen to all 3 hours and 39 minutes of the hearing, that single phrase stays in your head: "the passive voice."

2.

Twenty-five years ago, in *The Tipping Point*, I was fascinated by the idea that in social epidemics little things could make a big difference. I came up with rules to describe the internal workings of social contagions: 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: lower crime rates, teach kids how to read, curb cigarette smoking.

"Look at the world around you," I wrote. "It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push—in just the right place—it can be tipped."

In *Revenge of the Tipping Point*, I want to look at the underside of the possibilities I explored so long ago. If the world can be moved by just the slightest push, then the person who knows where and when to push has real power. So who are those people? What are their intentions? What techniques are they using? In the world of law enforcement, the word *forensic* refers to an investigation of the origins and scope of a criminal act: "reasons, culprits, and consequences." *Revenge of the Tipping Point* is an attempt to do a forensic investigation of social epidemics.

In the pages that follow, I'm going to take you to a mysterious office building in Miami with a very strange group of tenants, to a Marriott Hotel in Boston for an executive retreat that went badly awry, to a seemingly perfect town called Poplar Grove, to a cul-de-sac in Palo Alto, and on from there to places you've heard of and places you haven't. We're going to investigate what's weird about Waldorf Schools, meet a long-overlooked drug warrior named Paul E. Madden, raise an eyebrow at Harvard

University's women's rugby team, and learn about a 1970s television mini-series that changed the world. All of these are cases where people—either deliberately or inadvertently, virtuously or maliciously—made choices that altered the course and shape of a contagious phenomenon. And in every case those interventions raised questions we have to answer and problems we have to solve. That's the *revenge* of the Tipping Point: The very same tools we use to build a better world can also be used against us.

And at the end of the book I want to use the lessons gleaned from all of these examples to tell the *real* story of Witness #1, Witness #2, and Witness #3.

Politician #1: We have a letter from a mother in North Carolina...who lost her child, twenty years old, and hasn't recovered yet. She said, "The pain is too intense. It's more than I can bear. I have trouble finding the will to live and carrying on every single day...."

Mr. _____, I wanted to lay out these stories we've been receiving, and I'd like your personal response to these stories.

Witness #2 starts to talk. But there's no sound.

Politician #1: I can't hear. He's muted.

The witness fumbles with his computer.

Witness #2: I'm sorry...

His first true apology of the day, for not unmuting his microphone. He goes on:

I feel tremendous empathy, sorrow, and remorse that a product like _____ that was produced to help people and, I believe, has helped millions of people has also been associated with stories like you're

telling. I feel incredibly sorry for that. And I know our entire family does as well.

Has also been associated.

It's time for a hard conversation about epidemics. We need to acknowledge our own role in creating them. We need to be honest about all the subtle and sometimes hidden ways we try to manipulate them. We need a guide to the fevers and contagions that surround us.