

Book Reviews

Malcolm Gladwell. *The Tipping Point*. London: Bantam House. 2007. 279 pages. Paperback. £ 6.99.

The Tipping Point is a book about change. What brings on change and why so often it happens so quickly? The book is an intellectual journey taking the reader through the changes in the world of business, education, fashion, and media. It draws heavily from psychology, sociology, history, and epidemiology to explain these changes. The idea of “Tipping Point” is derived from epidemiology. It is the moment in any epidemic when the disease reaches its critical mass—the moment on the graph when the line shoots vertically upwards. Gladwell applies the same idea to “social epidemics”, and tries to figure out “tipping points” in business, social policy, advertisement, TV programming, and a number of other non-medical areas.

In social epidemiology, according to Gladwell, the “tipping point” is that moment when an idea, trend, or behaviour crosses a certain threshold and spreads far and wide. Gladwell believes that such big changes are a result of small events, and he provides a number of case studies to prove his point. For example, he takes the case of Hush Puppies, which from being a fading brand meant for the ‘un-cool’ people became a national and then an international brand when a few downtown New York trendsetters started wearing it. Adoption of the brand by a group of “opinion-makers” led others to follow in their footsteps (literally in this case!), increasing the visibility of the product to such an extent that it reached its “tipping point”, thus making the brand a success which even surprised the company itself.

The book has eight chapters, each dealing with a new theme and explaining the “Tipping Point” notion. Some of the chapter titles are: The Three Rules of Epidemic; The Law of the Few; The Stickiness Factor; The Power of Context; Conclusion: Focus, Test, and Believe. Two chapters deal solely with case studies elaborating his main thesis. These include case studies linked to suicide, smoking, power of rumours and translation, and crime control. Gladwell claims that the “tipping point” is a function of *the law of the few*—that is, a tiny proportion of people do the majority of the work to build the momentum for spreading an idea; *the stickiness factor* refers to the message having an impact and being remembered; and the *power of the context* emphasises the sensitivity of an action to the environment people are associated with.

The “few” in The Law of the Few are the individuals on whom the success of any social ‘epidemic’ is heavily dependent. They are the people with exceptional social skills, whom Gladwell calls the *connectors*, *mavens*, and *salesmen*. *Connectors* are people with special social communication skills to bring the world together. They are the people who are linked to everyone, and the rest of us are linked to the world through these special few. They manage to occupy many different worlds and sub-cultures. *Mavens* are the information specialists or the “market mavens”. They keep tabs on the prices and quality differences in products and are the databanks regarding such information. With their desire to help people make economically sound decisions, they are successful in gaining other people’s attention. The third piece in this puzzle is that of the *salesman*, who has the skills to persuade people when they are not convinced of what they are hearing. They

have the quality of being irresistible while persuading people, often employing non-verbal means.

The second factor that the author considers important for any idea to reach its “tipping point” is that of its *stickiness*. The stickiness factor is linked to the retainability of the content of the new message, idea, or behaviour. The message has to be so memorable that it could trigger change. Repetition can be a tool in helping make an idea “stick” and to move us into action. The third factor of *context* refers to the environment surrounding the spread of any idea. Gladwell believes that we are influenced by our environment, immediate context, and peer group. In other words, behaviour is a function of the social context—for instance, it is possible to be a better person on a clean street than on one that is unkempt and littered with trash.

The book offers many case studies that one can identify with, considering the current state of events in the country, Pakistan. When Gladwell talks about the “newscaster bias”, one can easily relate to what we see on our TV channels day in and day out with newscasters tainting each news item, consciously or unconsciously, with their own bias. Likewise, when the author writes in detail about the epidemic of teenage suicide in Micronesia, showing ten times higher rates than anywhere else in the world, one is almost convinced that behaviour can be transmitted from one person to another as easily as flu or any other infection. At the same time one cannot help thinking about the sudden increase in suicide rate in this country recently, with one suicide leading to another, stating poverty as the reason behind the act. The recent trend of “mob justice” witnessed in Karachi and Lahore also tends to validate Gladwell’s thesis of “social epidemic”. The book contains many similar concepts that can interest readers, including concepts like the *Broken Window Theory* (crime tempted by the site of crime), and the *Joint Memory System* (like a couple’s shared memory).

An interesting read, the book has its low points. There are certain places in the book where it drags. Gladwell goes some length to convince the reader that the success of TV shows like Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues was due to their *stickiness*. The reader’s attention seems to dip instead of *stick* or *tip* when the example is elaborated far too many pages. Similarly, at times one gets the feeling that the author is giving simplistic explanations of complex social phenomena. Reduced crime rate in New York or the case of Bernard Goetz were too complex an events to be explained by the presence or absence of graffiti on the city walls alone. It would not be wrong to say that the author finds simplistic explanations using too many concepts, ideas, and statistics in the hope that something would *stick*. Overburdened by factoids, the reader can lose track of the original idea behind the book on account of the barrage of concepts thrown in to support the main thesis.

Despite such drawbacks, the book is an interesting read, and even if not fully convinced, the reader is tipped over by the manner of the argument. This has been made possible by Gladwell’s brilliant writing and his ability to communicate with the reader.

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