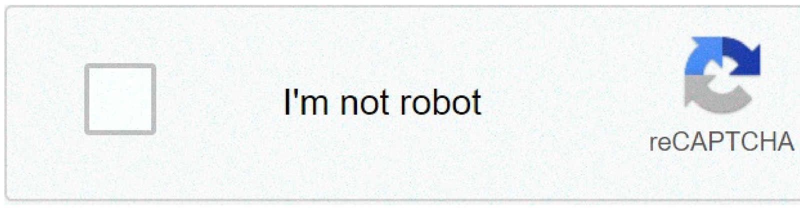

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The tipping point book review

Malcolm Gladwell, a staff writer for the New Yorker, has a way with words. He also has a way with ideas, and in this book posits an interesting concept: that major changes occur when things reach a "tipping point" (or "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point"). This idea is similar to that of the "paradigm shift", which is generally applied to science and our understanding of the world, but Gladwell attempts to show how it affects more mundane things: the sale of Hush Puppies shoes, epidemics, or the fall of crime in New York. The first example in the book - that of how Hush Puppies went from being a moribund brand, sold only to the un-hip, to a hugely successful national brand, thanks to a handful of downtown New York trendsetters - is a prime example of how such shifts can occur. A group of "opinion makers" started wearing these shoes; others saw them and copied the style, with people even driving to out-of-the-way places to buy up stocks of Hush Puppies. Then a few fashion designers used them on the walkway, and visibility reached the "tipping point". The brand then experienced a renewal that, to this day, astounds even those in the company, who had been ready to throw in the towel. But Gladwell then strays from this concept, talking about Paul Revere's famous ride to warn patriots that "the British are coming". Gladwell says that this event "is perhaps the most famous historical example of a word-of-mouth epidemic." But this doesn't fit in his other descriptions of "tipping points". After all, Revere's ride was a single incident - albeit an important one - but not one where anything "tipped". He alerted lots of people, in part because he knew them and was known, but there was no accumulation effect that caused this "ride" to have its famous results. Gladwell should also talk about what I'll call the "dipping point", that point in a book when the reader starts paying less attention because of information overload. For me, this started on page 112, when Gladwell had already spent far too many pages trying to convince me that "stickiness" was a key factor in the success of Sesame Street and Blue's Clues. Stickiness seems to be that indescribable, yet analyzable, factor that keeps you attention "stuck" on something. In this case, it is what keeps pre-schoolers glued to the TV screen. But this seems to have little to do with any "tipping point"; sure, it may attract and hold people, and contribute to the popularity of these shows, but I dipped as Gladwell stretched this example out over too many pages. The problem is that when Gladwell talks about people, he is sticky; when he talks about technology and processes, he dips. Chapter 2, The Law of the Few, talks about "connectors, mavens and salesmen", or three types of people who help spread ideas. Gladwell is in awe of all these people, and his prose is energetic. Yet when he describes the focus groups of pre-schoolers watching Sesame Street, it just gets turgid. Gladwell approaches the dramatic fall in crime in New York as a "tipping point", but tries to discount every meta-change that helped drop the crime rate: increased police presence, tougher sentencing, and, above all, a vibrant economy that lowered unemployment drastically among the underclass, those who commit crimes. He prefers to believe in some mystical force that "tipped" everyone from being mean to being nice. He claims that the first element that caused the tip was a crackdown on graffiti on subway cars: graffiti was cleaned off subway cars, showing the taggers that they would no longer be tolerated. Then it was a crackdown on fare-beating; stopping people from cheating obviously gave them new moral values. He loses me when, talking about the 1984 incident when Bernard Goetz shot four youths who were harassing him on a subway train, he claims this: "...the showdown on the subway between Bernie Goetz and those four youths had very little to do, in the end, with the tangled psychological pathology of Goetz, and very little as well to do with the background and poverty of the four youths who accosted him, and everything to do with the message sent by the graffiti on the walls and the disorder at the turnstiles." This after describing how Goetz, after a stern upbringing and being mugged and injured, got a gun, with clear plans to become a vigilante. This, after describing how the four youths had all been previously arrested for assault, and how at least two of them were on drugs at the time. But Gladwell finds nothing more than graffiti and turnstile-jumping to be the cause. Balderdash! Goetz was mad as hell, and was not going to take it any more. It's interesting how a tipping point can work in reverse. When an author writes well, he draws you into his stories, but his conclusions can be too ludicrous to accept. When the reader reaches that point, the BS detector goes on, and one starts noticing other stretches in logic, other concepts that just don't fit. He bandies around facts, ideas, studies and theories, none of which fit together neatly. But if you read the book enjoying the writing (Gladwell is a consummate journalist), you'll simply accept his ideas without question. Sort of the "power of context" that he describes in chapter 3, where he says that the environment where we do something is as important as what we do. The strong points of this book are many: an interesting idea, one that catches your mind; excellent writing; and a true desire, on the part of the author, to communicate with the reader. But the weak points are legion, and are an example of the current trend in "best-selling non-fiction books": a wealth of statistics, concepts and ideas, tossed about liberally, as if they are all being thrown against the wall to see which ones stick. There are so many, that the reader loses track, and actually loses sight of the initial idea behind the book. Gladwell is constantly leaning on monkeys, cognitive science, psychological experiments, the organizational structure of companies, and obscure concepts, in the hope that, together, they coalesce into something that inspires the reader to "buy" his idea. But I got lost in the muddle of disparate ideas that Gladwell used to try and ensure that some of them "stick". In the end, I finished this book without being convinced by Gladwell's arguments. I might have been convinced had he been more focused, instead of flitting from one idea to another, quoting studies and statistics. Above all, I wasn't sold by his argument; I saw it as a "dipping point" because of the way he presented it. Other readers may feel differently, but to me this book is incomplete, overburdened by factoids, and strays too much from its otherwise interesting premise. Kirk McElhearn Kirk McElhearn (kirk@mcelhearn.com) is a freelance writer and translator living in a village in the French Alps. You can find out all about him at his web site, . 2000 book by Malcolm Gladwell For other uses, see The Tipping Point (disambiguation). The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference Paperback editionAuthorMalcolm GladwellCountryUnited StatesLanguageEnglishSubjectPsychology, sociologyGenreNon-fictionPublisherLittle BrownPublication dateMarch 2000Media typePrint (paperback)Pages304ISBN0-316-34662-4 ISBN 0-316-31696-2 (first edition)OCLC55586972Dewey Decimal302 22LC ClassHM1033 .G53 2002Followed byBlink The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference is the debut book by Malcolm Gladwell, first published by Little, Brown in 2000. Gladwell defines a tipping point as "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point."[1] The book seeks to explain and describe the "mysterious" sociological changes that mark everyday life. As Gladwell states: "Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread like viruses do."[2] The examples of such changes in his book include the rise in popularity and sales of Hush Puppies shoes in the mid-1990s and the steep drop in New York City's crime rate after 1990. The three rules Gladwell describes the "three rules of epidemics" (or the three "agents of change") in the tipping points of epidemics. The Law of the Few "The Law of the Few" is, as Gladwell states: "The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts."[3] According to Gladwell, economists call this the "80/20 Principle, which is the idea that in any situation roughly 80 percent of the 'work' will be done by 20 percent of the participants" (see Pareto Principle).[4] These people are described in the following ways: Connectors are the people in a community who know large numbers of people and who are in the habit of making introductions. A connector is essentially the social equivalent of a computer network hub. They usually know people across an array of social, cultural, professional, and economic circles, and make a habit of introducing people who work or live in different circles. They are people who "link us up with the world...people with a special gift for bringing the world together."[5] They are "a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack [... for] making friends and acquaintances."[6] Gladwell characterizes these individuals as having social networks of over one hundred people. To illustrate, he cites the following examples: the midnight ride of Paul Revere, Milgram's experiments in the small world problem, the "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" trivia game, Dallas businessman Roger Horchow, and Chicagoan Lois Weisberg, a person who understands the concept of the weak tie. Gladwell attributes the social success of Connectors to the fact that "their ability to span many different worlds is a function of something intrinsic to their personality, some combination of curiosity, self-confidence, sociability, and energy."[7] Mavens are "information specialists", or "people we rely upon to connect us with new information."[4] They accumulate knowledge, especially about the marketplace, and know how to share it with others. Gladwell cites Mark Alpert as a prototypical Maven who is "almost pathologically helpful", further adding, "he can't help himself."[8] In this vein, Alpert himself concedes, "A Maven is someone who wants to solve other people's problems, generally by solving his own."[8] According to Gladwell, Mavens start "word-of-mouth epidemics" due to their knowledge, social skills, and ability to communicate.[9] As Gladwell states: "Mavens are really information brokers, sharing and trading what they know."[10] Salesmen are "persuaders", charismatic people with powerful negotiation skills. They tend to have an indefinable trait that goes beyond what they say, which makes others want to agree with them. Gladwell's examples include California businessman Tom Gau and news anchor Peter Jennings, and he cites several studies about the persuasive implications of non-verbal cues, including a headphone nod study (conducted by Gary Wells of the University of Alberta and Richard Petty of the University of Missouri) and William S. Condon's cultural microrhythms study. A similar theory to Gladwell's "Law of the Few" appears in Kurt Vonnegut's Bluebeard (1987). In Bluebeard chapter 24, Paul Slazinger is working his first volume of non-fiction titled "The Only Way to Have a Successful Revolution in Any Field of Human Activity." Specifically, Vonnegut's 1987 character describes: "The team must consist of three sorts of specialists, he says. Otherwise the revolution, whether in politics or the arts or the sciences or whatever, is sure to fail. The rarest of these specialists, he says, is an authentic genius - a person capable of having seemingly good ideas not in general circulation. "A genius working alone," he says, "is invariably ignored as a lunatic." The second sort of specialist is a lot easier to find; a highly intelligent citizen in good standing in his or her community, who understands and admires the fresh ideas of the genius, and who testifies that the genius is far from mad. "A person like this working alone," says Slazinger, "can only yearn loud for changes, but fail to say what their shaped should be." The third sort of specialist is a person who can explain everything, no matter how complicated, to the satisfaction of most people, no matter how stupid or pigheaded they may be. "He will say almost anything in order to be interesting and exciting," says Slazinger. "Working alone, depending solely on his own shallow ideas, he would be regarded as being as full of shit as a Christmas turkey." The Tipping Point does not make any reference to or acknowledgement of Vonnegut's Bluebeard. The Stickiness Factor The Stickiness Factor refers to the specific content of a message that renders its impact memorable. Popular children's television programs such as Sesame Street and Blue's Clues pioneered the properties of the stickiness factor, thus enhancing effective retention of educational content as well as entertainment value. The Power of Context Human behavior is sensitive to and strongly influenced by its environment. Gladwell explains: "Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur."[11] For example, "zero tolerance" efforts to combat minor crimes such as fare-beating and vandalism of the New York subway led to a decline in more violent crimes citywide. Gladwell describes the bystander effect, and explains how Dunbar's number plays into the tipping point, using Rebecca Wells' novel Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood, evangelist John Wesley, and the high-tech firm W. L. Gore and Associates. Dunbar's number is the maximum number of individuals in a society or group that someone can have real social relationships with, which Gladwell dubs the "rule of 150."[12] Other key concepts Gladwell also includes two chapters of case studies, situations in which tipping point concepts were used in specific situations. These situations include the athletic shoe company Airwalk, the diffusion model, how rumors are spread, decreasing the spread of syphilis in Baltimore, teen suicide in Micronesia, and teen smoking in the United States. Reception Public Gladwell received an estimated US$1–1.5 million advance for The Tipping Point, which sold 1.7 million copies by 2006.[13] In the wake of the book's success, Gladwell was able to earn as much as $40,000 per lecture.[14] Sales increased again in 2006 after the release of Gladwell's next book, Blink.[15] The Guardian ranked The Tipping Point #94 in its list of 100 Best Books of the 21st Century.[16] Scientific Some of Gladwell's analysis as to why the phenomenon of the "tipping point" occurs (particularly in relation to his idea of the "law of the few") and its unpredictable elements is based on the 1967 small-world experiment by social psychologist Stanley Milgram.[17] Milgram distributed letters to 160 students in Nebraska, with instructions that they be sent to a stockbroker in Boston (not personally known to them) by passing the letters to anyone else that they believed to be socially closer to the target. The study found that it took an average of six links to deliver each letter. Of particular interest to Gladwell was the finding that just three friends of the stockbroker provided the final link for half of the letters that arrived successfully.[18] This gave rise to Gladwell's theory that certain types of people are key to the dissemination of information. In 2003, Duncan Watts, a network theory physicist at Columbia University, repeated the Milgram study by using a web site to recruit 61,000 people to send messages to 18 targets worldwide.[19] He successfully reproduced Milgram's results (the average length of the chain was approximately six links). However, when he examined the pathways taken, he found that "hubs" (highly connected people) were not crucial. Only 5% of the e-mail messages had passed through one of the hubs. This casts doubt on Gladwell's assertion that specific types of people are responsible for bringing about large levels of change. Watts pointed out that if it were as simple as finding the individuals that can disseminate information prior to a marketing campaign, advertising agencies would presumably have a far higher success rate than they do. He also stated that Gladwell's theory does not square with much of his research into human social dynamics performed in the last ten years.[20] Economist Steven Levitt and Gladwell have a running dispute about whether the fall in New York City's crime rate can be attributed to the actions of the police department and "Fixing Broken Windows" (as claimed in The Tipping Point). In Freakonomics, Levitt attributes the decrease in crime to two primary factors: 1) a drastic increase in the number of police officers trained and deployed on the streets and hiring Raymond W. Kelly as police commissioner (thanks to the efforts of former mayor David Dinkins) and 2) a decrease in the number of unwanted children made possible by Roe v. Wade, causing crime to drop nationally in all major cities—"[e]ven in Los Angeles, a city notorious for bad policing".[21] And although psychologist Steven Pinker argues the second factor relies on tenuous links,[22][23] recent evidence seems to uphold the likelihood of a significant causal link.[24] See also Tipping point (sociology) Micromotives and Macrobehavior Diffusion of innovations Epidemiology Fold catastrophe Hundredth monkey effect Meme Made to Stick Microtrends: The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes The Big Mo References ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 12. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 7. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 33. ^ a b Gladwell 2000, p. 19. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 38. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 41. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 49. ^ a b Gladwell 2000, p. 66. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 67. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 69. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 139. ^ Gladwell 2000, p. 179. ^ McNett, Gavin (March 17, 2000). "Idea epidemics". Salon.com. Archived from the original on January 25, 2009. 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