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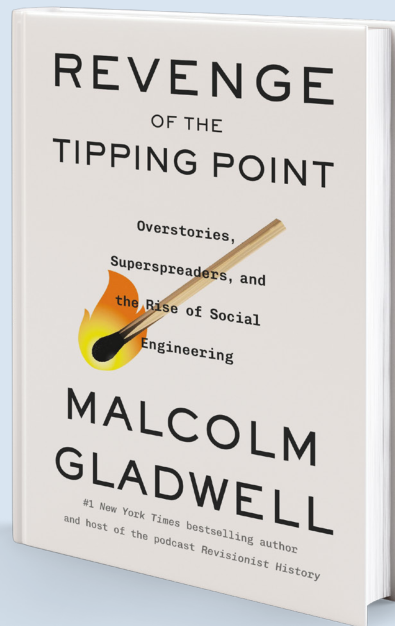

Revenge of the Tipping Point

Overstories, Superspreaders, and the Rise of Social Engineering

By Malcolm Gladwell

Malcolm Gladwell has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1996. He is the author of *The Tipping Point, Blink, Outliers,* and *What the Dog Saw*. Prior to joining The New Yorker, he was a reporter at the Washington Post. Gladwell was born in England and grew up in rural Ontario. He now lives in New York.

A Book Review by Soundview

Take the Tipping Points Seriously

Malcolm Gladwell opens up his book, ***Revenge of the Tipping Point: Overstories, Superspreaders, and the Rise of Social Engineering***, with a discussion of the opioid crisis in America although the reader does not know that this is the crisis he is writing about until much later in the book. He details court trials where corporate executives attempt to evade responsibility for the role they and their company played in the epidemic, in part by using the passive voice. In order to evade taking responsibility, even while they are seemingly accepting responsibility, they use phrases such as "our product…. Despite our best intentions and best efforts, has been associated with abuse and addiction." Gladwell claims that this use of the passive voice permeates all three and half hours of testimony. Gladwell will later end his book with a discussion of the same crisis and explain the factors that played most prominently in its destructive nature in different parts of the country.

Gladwell uses the opioid epidemic, racial housing policies, and Covid superspreaders to expand upon ideas he first introduced in *The Tipping Point* years earlier and to explain how the people with real power in the world are those who "know when and where to push" the lever, activating the tipping point. He states that his book "is an attempt to do a forensic investigation into social epidemics." He believes that everybody needs to take accountability for the ways in which they help create epidemics.

Presenting Three Puzzles

Gladwell details the exploits of bank robbers, Caspar and C-Dog. During their heyday in the early 1990s, there was a large upswing in car robberies in Los Angeles. Gladwell claims that a decent number of these carjackings were actually facilitated by Caspar and C-Dog. These partners would find someone to steal a car, rob a bank, and then use that stolen car as their getaway car. The person actually stealing the car was not the only person on their payroll. They would hire people to actually perform the bank robberies as well. These were often very young teenagers who likely got very little profit from performing the robberies as they had to give almost all of the money to Caspar and C-Dog. The two ended up with the cur-

rent bank robbery record of 175, beating the previous record of only 72. On one day alone, they facilitated 5 bank robberies. Soon, other criminals replicated their method of getting other people to actually rob the banks for them. Robbing banks was profitable and simple because it would take authorities many hours to investigate a crime that took mere minutes to perpetrate, leaving authorities always steps behind. These bank robberies, Gladwell explains, were a contagion. Each new robber did not independently devise the idea to hire others to do the dirty work. They learned it from Caspar and C-Dog. This is typical as "social epidemics are propelled by the efforts of an exceptional few – people who play outsized social roles."

Gladwell notes a puzzle in the case of Caspar and C-Dog. The bank robberies they inspired occurred in Los Angeles but did not spread to other cities. This is unlike epidemics that are not known to respect boundaries. To explain this puzzle, Gladwell turns to physician John Wennberg. Wennverg noticed that medical spending in different towns varied greatly depending on where a person lived. This spending did not correlate with the income of residents. The conclusion he came to was that "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." Eventually, it was determined that small area variation such as described above has to do with contagion. Just as the contagion of bank robberies did not spread, neither does the contagion of overspending on medical care.

Gladwell then turns to his next puzzle. He discusses the shockingly low vaccination rates of students who attend Waldorf schools. He states that while some parents do send their children to such a school to join a community where relatively few vaccinate, this is not generally the case. Rather, people pick up anti-vaccination stances after joining the Waldorf school. Gladwell explains how Waldorf schools promote independent learning as well as intellectual curiosity. Vaccinating parents, on the other hand, tend to defer to authority because they do not completely understand how the vaccines work. They trust medical professionals to advocate for what is best. Gladwell believes that the Waldorf community, by encouraging people not to default to outside expertise, tends to veer parents away from vaccination. Despite the fact that these Waldorf parents associate with non-Waldorf parents as well and also hear the advice of authorities, and despite the fact that their children sometimes then get these vaccine-preventable illnesses, the pull of Waldorf's ideals is strong enough to help them maintain their stances.

Gladwell then explains the concept of overstory. An overstory is "not something explicit that's drilled into every inhabitant. The overstory is made up of things way up in the air, in many cases outside of our awareness." Overstories are often overlooked by people who are focusing on what is in front of them, but Gladwell believes they are powerful enough to explain situations like Waldorf schools' vaccination track records.

Gladwell then turns his attention to a real school in the pseudonymous town of Poplar Grove. The town is described as being an upper middle class that centers around family, and many see it as an ideal town. Children who grow up in this town tend to do well throughout their lives. The problem with Poplar Grove is that a disproportionate number of successful teenagers have taken their lives, and Gladwell uses the example of this town to ask how much the members of a community are responsible for the spread of contagions.

To explore what happened in Poplar Creek, Gladwell turns his attention to zoos. When zoos tried to breed cheetahs in captivity, they had abysmal success rates with poor fertility in general and then poor outcomes from the offspring. Upon further investigation, they learned that far more than other species, the genetic makeup of cheetahs is incredibly uniform. They are so uniform, in fact, that cheetahs can accept skin grafts from other cheetahs without worry of their bodies rejecting the tissue as foreign. Incidentally, they believe there must have been a large kill off of cheetahs sometime in the past. Only a few survived, and those few are the ancestors of current cheetahs.

Cheetahs and the students at Poplar Grove are part of monocultures, and monocultures are very prone to contagions. In Poplar Grove, kids all have very similar expectations placed upon them whether they want to meet those expectations or not. Schools like the high school in Poplar Grove will have the same types of cliques that other schools do such as jocks and skaters, but students in all of those groups tend to be high achieving and popular. Even outsiders are high-achieving. The problem with this uniform culture, Gladwell maintains, is that it tends to diminish resilience. In a typical community, a contagion can infect one group, but the groups are different enough that the contagion does not spread outside of the confines of that group. Because everyone at Poplar Grove is so uniform, however, there is nothing blocking the spread of a contagion, in this case suicide, from infecting all of the groups. Gladwell claims that "The best solution to a monoculture epidemic is to break up the monoculture." The parents of Poplar Grove could have sent their children elsewhere, but they did not because they actively wanted the high achieving atmosphere of the Polar Grove school. He labels Poplar Grove as iatrogenesis which is a medical term that refers to when an intervention actually causes an illness.

The Social Engineers

Gladwell turns his attention to Lawrence Lane in California. When this 25 lot street was created, it had rules in regards to the racial makeup of the area that were put into place to limit white flight. It all is centered around the concept of a tipping point. In this case, the tipping point refers to the percentage of non-white people who can move into a neighborhood before white people start moving out. To explore where that actual tipping point is, Gladwell quotes numerous statistics. Washington D.C.'s head of public schools said that "once a school hit 30 percent black, it went to ''99 percent in a very short time.'" This analysis as well as multiple others makes Gladwell state that the tipping point usually occurs when previous outsiders begin to make up between a quarter and a third of the makeup of a group. He refers to this as the magic third, and he believes it is so important that it can be considered "a universal law."

Gladwell believes that schools like Harvard give student athletes an advantage because of the Magic Third rule, and this is a type of social engineering.

This magic third is what governed the housing rules at Lawrence Lane. One third of homes were meant for white people, one third for Black people, and one third for Asian people. This was meant to keep all three groups in proportion and was meant to stop the white flight that would happen if any other group began to make up more than thirty percent. The problem came when a white person wanted to sell one of the vacant lots to a Black family, relatives of current Lawrence Lane residents. It was hard for Black people to find housing in the area at the time, so the family really needed this property. The residents had to decide whether maintaining their ratios and doing what was better for the community was worth denying this family housing. This was a difficult moral decision, but in the end, they decided to resist the sale. Because of the difficulty of such decisions, Gladwell writes "It's no wonder, then, that when most people attempt to play games around tipping points, they do so on the sly."

To further explore the issue of tipping points, Gladwell turns to women's rugby at Harvard. Rugby, Gladwell notes, is not a particularly popular sport among American women in part because of its violent nature. Recruiters often had to search hard to find recruits for Harvard's Rugby team. Gladwell explains that there are two tracts for admissions to Harvard. The first is the traditional track for highly intelligent students. The second consists of athletes, legacy students, and other students of special interest, and this second group comprises approximately 30% of Harvard admissions. It is much easier for someone in this second group to get into Harvard, and they can do so with fewer academic qualifications. The saying is that "The athletes always get in." Gladwell believes that schools like Harvard give student athletes an advantage because of the Magic Third rule, and this is a type of social engineering.

He turns to the story of Columbia University where many Jewish students eventually enrolled. Harvard's president in the early twentieth century was Abbot Lawrence Lowell, and he, along with other college presidents, sought to limit Jewish enrollment in their schools. Students were actually ranked for admissions based upon the likelihood that they were Jewish. Still, by 1925, Jewish students came close to making up a third of the student population. In response, Harvard moved to a more subjective system for accepting candidates that gave the decision makers more power to turn people away. The goal was not to eliminate Jewish students but rather to limit them.

Gladwell believes that Harvard began using sports as a way to keep certain types of students under the Magic Third. What many of these athletes have in common is that it takes a tremendous amount of money to get these athletes to the place where they are competitive at a college level. Gladwell believes colleges like Harvard use athletics as a way to ensure that certain minority communities never get above the Magic Third. Rugby is important because of who it keeps out. Because of this, Gladwell states that "social engineering has quietly become one of the central activities of the American establishment."

Having discussed the importance of overstories and monocultures, Gladwell goes on to explain the importance that a few key players can make in a contagion. To investigate this, he looks to the role of emissions testing in lowering toxic chemicals. He notes that a small handful of vehicles actually account for the most emissions in an area. Routine checking of all vehicles does little to solve this problem. What would be more effective would be to have detection devices set up around a city with police officers pulling over those who create unusual amounts of emissions. Gladwell says that "Urban air pollution is a perfect example of a problem caused by the Few. But we behave as if it's a problem caused by all of us. No one wants to act on the asymmetry." Focusing on the Few causes many problems. For example, high emissions vehicles could be owned primarily by poorer people. What should officials do if these people cannot afford car repairs? Gladwell claims that increasing technology will make it possible for communities to determine who the Few are in many different scenarios, and society will then have to decide what to do with this information. This is a problem even in science where a very small percentage of people aerosolize viruses far more effectively than others, and as such, they provide a much greater health risk to others. What ought to be done about these people during pandemics or when people are close together? These are all tipping point questions.

The Overstory

Gladwell turns to the Holocaust in his exploration of overstories as he discusses the Los Angeles survivors' club. The group started talking about memorabilia they had from the Holocaust. These were important items that they wanted saved but that they also did not want in their homes. Their collection formed a memorial of sorts that people could visit, and similar memorials came up around the country. Gladwell asks why it took fifteen years after World War II ended for any memorial of this type to be established. He uses this question to investigate overstories that take over more than just a small area but actually permeate a whole culture or a whole country. He believes there are things people can do to change or affect these overstories.

Gladwell points out how very few references to the Holocaust occur in literature and textbooks in the early years after World War II. Even Jewish people themselves abstained from speaking much about the atrocities that occurred during World War II, and many people in those years may not even know what the word, holocaust, referred to. This changed in 1978, however

when NBC aired Holocaust: The Story of the Family Weiss. This nine and a half hour program was the first real exposure most people had to the Holocaust, and while activists like Elie Wisel found real fault in the mini-series, it was an important cultural moment that changed the way Americans viewed the Holocaust and even the extent that they knew about it. Such televised moments are hard to come by these days when there are so many viewing options available to people, but it was a significant cultural moment of the time. "That's what storytellers do," Gladwell writes. "They can change the overstory."

Gladwell then goes on to say how people are often surprised by these social contagions when they come on, and he uses the example of gay marriage to explain this. Back in the 1980s the thought of gay marriage ever becoming legal seemed far out of the realm of possibility. Many people at the time believed the narrative that gay men were not interested in commitment with one person and that they even questioned whether homosexuals could even ever be happy. Even in 2005, many people believed it could take upwards of 25 years for gay marriage ever to become possible. A made for tv movie came on in 1992 called Doing Time on Maple Drive where a young man comes out as being gay. Gladwell quotes Larry Gross as saying, "It's not the media pushing this button to get that effect. It's the media creating the cultural consciousness about how the world works… and what the rules are." The problem with this movie was that the character's homosexuality is at the center of who he is and is at the center of the narrative. It is a problem that can be solved. It is not an incidental fact, and because of this, the film did not change the public's feelings about homosexuality or gay marriage.

Years later, however, Will and Grace came along. This was a television show about gay characters, but one of the gay main characters, Will, did not "seem too gay." Because gay people were a key part of the story and because their homosexuality was not presented as something to be solved, this show did start to change people's opinions. Gladwell thinks that many people are surprised when tipping points occur because nobody really knows how close they are to having 25% of people buy into a concept. Therefore, when this 25% is breached, it comes as a shock. Had people known how close they were creeping to that number in regards to gay marriage, the tipping point may have been more predictable.

In Conclusion

Throughout his book, Malcolm Gladwell works to explain the factors that contribute to tipping points and also the ways in which these tipping points can be manipulated. He is careful to explain that such manipulation can bring into question some serious ethical issues. His careful use of extensive examples helps his reader understand his concepts more fully. As the world becomes even more technologically advanced and as people begin to understand sociological principles more clearly, these questions of intervention will become ever more prominent.

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