

# The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major Russell R. Henry\*

## I. Introduction

What do Paul Revere, Hush Puppies, teenage smoking, *Sesame Street*, violent crime in New York City, syphilis in Baltimore, *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, and teenage suicide in Micronesia have in common? They are all social epidemics covered in Malcolm Gladwell's first book, which essentially performs an autopsy of seemingly diverse occurrences to explain a common blueprint. The term "tipping point" comes from epidemiology, the study of epidemics, and is defined as "that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire."<sup>2</sup> Gladwell, writer for *The New Yorker* and best-selling author of several books<sup>3</sup>, breaks down these events, and many more, in an effort to prove "that ideas and behavior and messages and products sometimes behave just like outbreaks of infectious disease. They are social epidemics."<sup>4</sup> In doing so, he finds three rules that are common to these social fads, behaviors, and ideas that tip: the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context.

## II. Father of a Subgenre

It is no surprise that each of Gladwell's books has spent many weeks on best seller lists, and that he has become an "all-out phenomenon."<sup>5</sup> A gifted story-teller, he displays an uncanny ability to take seemingly unrelated events and demonstrate commonality in a way that is entertaining and easy to understand. "I have two parallel things I'm interested in," Gladwell said. "One is, I'm interested in collecting interesting stories, and the other is I'm interested in collecting interesting research. What I'm looking for is

cases where they overlap."<sup>6</sup> When this book debuted in 2000, it was one of a kind. Today, bookshelves at libraries and bookstores are filled with this "highly contagious hybrid genre of nonfiction, one that takes a nonthreatening and counterintuitive look at pop culture and the mysteries of the everyday."<sup>7</sup>

## III. The Law of the Few: Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen

On the same night that Paul Revere made his famous ride, William Dawes set out on an almost identical task. Both men covered roughly an equal distance including approximately the same number of towns with the identical urgent message of an imminent British attack, but they had vastly different results. Revere was wildly successful and is still thought of as an American icon, while Dawes failed to get the message out and is virtually unknown. The difference, according to Gladwell, is simple. Revere was a Connector and a Maven; Dawes was neither.<sup>8</sup>

"The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of circumstances."<sup>9</sup> In order for an idea or social epidemic to take flight, it takes a special group of people to get it off the ground. Gladwell identifies these people as Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen<sup>10</sup>. Connectors, since they know loads of people and run in many different circles, have a special gift for uniting. While Connectors are in the people business, Mavens are information brokers. Mavens are not only obsessed with accumulating all known information about a product, they also actively seek to share that valuable knowledge with others.<sup>11</sup> Salesmen, the third and final member of the group that controls word-of-mouth epidemics, are fervently committed to a product or idea and have an innate ability to persuade others of its necessity.

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<sup>1</sup> MALCOLM GLADWELL, *THE TIPPING POINT* (2000)

<sup>2</sup> *THE TIPPING POINT*, <http://gladwell.com/the-tipping-point> (last visited July 7, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> MALCOLM GLADWELL, *BLINK: THE POWER OF THINKING WITHOUT THINKING* (2005); *OUTLIERS: THE STORY OF SUCCESS* (2008); MALCOLM GLADWELL, *WHAT THE DOG SAW: AND OTHER ADVENTURES* (2009); MALCOLM GLADWELL, *DAVID AND GOLIATH: UNDERDOGS, MISFITS, AND THE ART OF BATTLING GIANTS* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> *Q&A with Malcolm*, *THE TIPPING POINT*, <http://gladwell.com/the-tipping-point/the-tipping-point-q-and-a/> (last visited July 7, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Donado, *The Gladwell Effect*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 5, 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/05/books/review/05donadio.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>.

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<sup>6</sup> Eric Jaffe, *Malcolm in the Middle*, AFP OBSERVER, vol 19, no. 3, Mar. 2006, <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2006/march-06/malcolm-in-the-middle.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Donado, *supra* note 4.

<sup>8</sup> GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 30–34, 56–62.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 33.

<sup>10</sup> Ori Braffman also identifies certain sets of people who are important to change in an organization and attempts to define attributes belonging to these individuals. See ORI BRAFFMAN, *THE STARFISH AND THE SPIDER: THE UNSTOPPABLE POWER OF LEADERLESS ORGANIZATIONS* (2006).

<sup>11</sup> *Id.*

The U. S. military, and the judge advocate community in particular, is filled with bright and talented people. As a leader, peer, or follower, it can be extremely beneficial to know the people around you and be able to identify any special skills they possess. One need not look too far to discover the Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople in your unit or section. The Salesmen cannot wait to present their case to members or judges. The Connectors seem to know someone in every geographic location with each specialty and are happy to get you in touch with just the right person with the information you are seeking. The Mavens can be found devouring each blog with a military law nexus or exploring the distant digital corners of Westlaw. Once identified, these special people can be utilized to spread key messages and institute positive social epidemics within the two professions of arms and law.

#### IV. The Stickiness Factor<sup>12</sup>

In the digital world, we are bombarded with information from a variety of sources on an assortment of platforms. Most information simply goes in one ear and out the other. Only a few things truly grab our attention and stay with us. Those messages have the highly sought after Stickiness Factor, the second of the rules. “The Stickiness Factor says that there are specific ways of making a contagious message memorable; there are relatively simple changes in the presentation and structuring of information that can make a big difference in how much of an impact it makes.”<sup>13</sup> Simply including basic facts (e.g., a map of the campus with the health building circled, plus hours when the vaccination was given) in a tetanus booklet distributed to students at Yale University increased the vaccination rate from three percent to twenty-eight percent.<sup>14</sup> The key to stickiness in an extremely effective advertising campaign for the Columbia Record Club in the 1970s was a little gold treasure box tucked into each advertisement.<sup>15</sup> *Sesame Street*, the groundbreaking children’s educational television show, would have likely tanked without tweaks following initial test-marketing. By continually testing concepts and using the results to make small but crucial modifications, the creators of *Sesame Street* have been able to make their brand of educational television programming sticky for over forty years.<sup>16</sup>

During a court-martial, members get bombarded with facts and arguments; successful trial attorneys are able to get their themes stuck in the heads of members. A sticky rules

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<sup>12</sup> See CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH, *MADE TO STICK* (2008) (offering an entire book on their concept of “stickiness”).

<sup>13</sup> GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 25.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 95–97.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 93–95.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 99–110.

of engagement or law of armed conflict brief<sup>17</sup> will promote understanding, which can increase adherence to the laws, orders, and regulations by Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. The key is to be like the creators of *Sesame Street* and continuously analyze and test the structure and format of your material. Find attention getters that work (like the gold box) and include information that turns easily forgettable, clinical information into something that is practical and personal (such as health clinic map and hours of operation). The key is to hold the attention of the audience and provide them with memorable information that invokes action. “There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it.”<sup>18</sup>

#### V. The Power of Context

“Epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur.”<sup>19</sup> The “Power of Context” is equally as important to epidemics as the “Law of the Few” and the “Stickiness” Factor since seemingly insignificant alterations in context can lead to massive changes. Cleaning up the graffiti on the subway and repairing broken windows led to a plummeting crime rate in New York City in the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> During a psychology experiment in Palo Alto, California, during the 1970s, “normal and healthy” people rapidly transformed into sadistic guards in a mock prison setting.<sup>21</sup> In another experiment at Princeton University, only ten percent of seminary students who were told that they were late for a presentation stopped to help an actor feigning illness (“slumped in an alley, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning.”)<sup>22</sup> The presentation these seminarians were in such a hurry to get to, that they literally stepped over a man crying for help, was about the story of the Good Samaritan.<sup>23</sup> A simple change in context can have a profound effect on expected behavior.

Groups also play a major role in social epidemics. *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* went from selling 15,000 hardcover books to becoming a runaway best-seller paperback (which later became a major motion picture) largely because it became the darling of book discussion

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<sup>17</sup> See also *Teaching That Sticks*, HEATH BROTHERS, <http://heathbrothers.com/download/mts-teaching-that-sticks.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 132.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 139.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 135–51.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 152–55.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 164.

<sup>23</sup> See *Luke 10:25-37* (story of the Good Samaritan).

groups.<sup>24</sup> John Wesley successfully used the power of community to grow Methodism in England and North America from 20,000 to 90,000 followers in the 1780s.<sup>25</sup> “The lesson of *Ya-Ya* and John Wesley is that small, close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea.”<sup>26</sup>

Understanding the group dynamic and how context can influence behavior is vital to successfully executing the responsibilities of being a judge advocate. This knowledge can explain what happens in the members’ deliberation room, or how a previously law-abiding small unit can tip to become war criminals. Hopefully, this understanding can steer behavior in a positive direction.

## VI. Criticism

Though Gladwell is a beloved best-selling author, founder of a subgenre, and speaker who commands up to \$100,000 per speech, he is not without his critics.<sup>27</sup> Most critics claim that he overreaches on his conclusions and his research lacks sufficient scientific rigor.<sup>28</sup> Jonah Berger, professor of marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, flatly claims that “fifty percent of *The Tipping Point* is wrong.”<sup>29</sup> “Gladwell is great at telling stories,” Berger continues, “but sometimes the stories get ahead of the facts.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, he is a journalist writing about science and not a scientist. In a rather sheepish and disarming way, Gladwell essentially surrenders the point in 2013 when asked to comment on Berger’s criticism on his initial book, offering: “I was just a journalist describing stuff. These guys [social scientists] are actually doing the work. I’m far more interested in what he [Berger] has to say about it than what I think about it.”<sup>31</sup>

## VII. Conclusion

More than anything, this book is a collection of extremely interesting and diverse stories. If nothing else, Gladwell is an exceptionally gifted author with a special

talent for translating academic studies into secular understanding. However, there is nothing in the book that is life-altering. The fact that a few vital people (Connectors, Mavens, Salesmen) pushing a great idea (Stickiness Factor) at the right time or in the right place (the Power of Context) can lead to a social epidemic is far from groundbreaking. As Alan Wolffe, in his review of the book for *The New York Times*, puts it, “Gladwell’s rules of epidemic behavior are common sense dressed up as science.”<sup>32</sup> However, common sense is not always common. Moreover, it does not hurt to be reminded of relatively straight-forward concepts while being entertained by Gladwell’s prose.

This book, Gladwell’s initial offering, is an enjoyable read that boasts extremely entertaining and diverse stories. It is important not for groundbreaking ideas, but for demonstrating that social science can be packaged in an entertaining and thought-provoking way. This book is not likely to change lives, but it can provoke ideas and spur action. While some of Gladwell’s other books have arguably more application to military matters,<sup>33</sup> this one is a recommended read for members of the dual profession of arms and law, if for nothing more than aiding judge advocates in recognizing the special people around them and learning how to leverage them. Additionally, it arms the reader with fascinating stories to facilitate dinner party conversations.

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<sup>24</sup> REBECCA WELLS, *DIVINE SECRETS OF THE YA-YA SISTERHOOD: A NOVEL* (2004).

<sup>25</sup> GLADWELL, *supra* note 1, at 172.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 174.

<sup>27</sup> Danielle Sacks, *Jonah Berger Wants to be the Next Malcolm Gladwell. Welcome to the Making of a Guru, 2013 edition*, FAST COMPANY, Apr. 2013, at 104.

<sup>28</sup> Jason Zengerle, *Geek Pop Star*, N. Y. MAG. (Nov. 17, 2008), <http://nymag.com/arts/books/features/52014/>.

<sup>29</sup> Sacks *supra* note 24, at 102.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 104.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.*

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<sup>32</sup> Alan Wolffe, *The Next Big Thing: Malcolm Gladwell Examines What Makes Fads, Well, Faddish*. N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 5, 2000), <http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/03/05/reviews/000305.05.wolffet>.

<sup>33</sup> See MALCOLM GLADWELL, *BLINK* (2005) (dedicating an entire chapter to the experiences of Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired) in Vietnam); MALCOLM GLADWELL, *OUTLIERS* (2008) (explaining Gladwell’s findings that 10,000 hours of the right kind of practice in a discipline can lead one to greatness); and MALCOLM GLADWELL, DAVID AND GOLIATH (2013) (discussing at length Philistine and Israeli tactics during the epic showdown between David and Goliath).