About the Author:
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General Overview:
When scientists study epidemics, they refer to a “tipping point” as being the moment at which a virus reaches critical mass and then exhibits sudden and dramatic growth almost overnight. New ideas in politics and society at large exhibit the same behavior. Ideas can start at the fringes and struggle to rise above the background noise for quite some time but once they reach their own tipping points, they will suddenly enjoy exponential growth and migrate into wide-scale popularity.

There are three factors which each play a role in determining whether a new idea stays in the background or instead goes viral and tips into wide-scale popularity and influence. Those factors are:
1. The Law of the Few – the right kind of person must champion an idea before it will reach the tipping point.
2. The Stickiness Factor – ideas which tip must have a quality which compels people to pay attention.
3. The Power of Context – the environment in which the idea is introduced must be just right.

While the notion that there is a single point at which a new idea shows a sharp and dramatic uptick in growth and acceptance may sound farfetched and unlikely, tipping points do exist. The world we know is not always linear where the results generated are commensurate with the effort invested. Ideas follow the pattern of viruses where exponential rather than geometric growth is the norm. Big changes in society can sometimes flow from small events and these changes can happen very quickly.

* Please Note: This political book summary does not offer judgment or opinion on the book’s contents. The ideas, viewpoints and arguments are presented just as the book’s author had intended.
The Three Rules of Epidemics

Modern day society always has some interesting trends, styles and phenomena bubbling away in the background. Some of these ideas stay in isolated pockets or small niches while others cross the Rubicon and get adopted by the broader population. In exhibiting this kind of behavior, new ideas follow the same pattern as viral epidemics. There is a crucial juncture, a tipping point, at which ideas take on a life of their own and become significant trends.

The challenge for anyone trying to promote a new idea is to get it to the tipping point. There are “Three Rules of Epidemics” which effect whether an idea gets to its tipping point or not. These are the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor and the Power of Context. Anyone who aspires to promote an idea that hopefully will go on to have a great impact on society had better become familiar with and competent in using these three rules.

Three Rules of Epidemics – 1. The Law of the Few

One of the most famous stories in history is the midnight ride of Boston silversmith Paul Revere to Lexington. This took place on the night of April 18, 1775. In two hours, Paul Revere rode thirteen miles alerting the colonial leaders in Charlestown, Medford, North Cambridge and Menotomy. The news spread like a virus and was in Lincoln, Massachusetts by 1 A.M., Sudbury by 3 A.M., Andover (40 miles from Boston) by 5 A.M. and Ashby by nine in the morning. As a result, when the British finally began their march towards Lexington to arrest John Hancock and Samuel Adams, to their utter astonishment they were met with organized and fierce resistance. From this exchange came the war known as the American Revolution.

At first glance, this may seem like the most famous example of the spread of a word-of-mouth epidemic in history. Most people assume the message (“The British are coming!”) in and of itself was so sensational Paul Revere couldn’t miss. That explanation, however, ignores other facts about that evening’s events.

At the same time as Paul Revere left Boston and rode north, a fellow revolutionary, William Dawes, rode west. He had the same message as Paul Revere, and worked his way through the towns to the west of Boston towards Lexington. Dawes covered just as many miles as Paul Revere, and yet when the militia assembled the next day to fight the British, there was hardly anyone there from the towns Dawes alerted. And, while history reserves a notable spot for Paul Revere, hardly anyone has ever heard of William Dawes.

So why did Dawes fail where Paul Revere was such a great success? If the spread of a word-of-mouth virus is dependant on the quality of the message, both men should have been equally successful. Nor were the villages Dawes visited more pro-British than the towns Dawes alerted. In fact, when the men in the towns to the west of Boston heard the war had commenced, they flocked to join up.

The difference was Paul Revere was a “Connector”. He was intensely social and gregarious. Revere was also an avid fisherman, hunter, card-player, theater patron and a successful businessman. Paul Revere was well connected, and had the 18th century equivalent of a very fat Rolodex because he moved in so many circles. He was one of the community’s most prominent citizens, and his silversmith shop was a natural place where people would congregate to swap little snippets of information about the British army.

Therefore, when a stable hand overheard a British officer say to another there would be “hell to pay tomorrow”, he passed that piece of information on to Paul Revere. When Revere set out on his horse ride through various towns in the dead of night, he would have known exactly whose doors to knock on. Revere knew who all the key players were in each town – people who would act as Connectors themselves in passing the message on as rapidly as possible.
William Dawes, by contrast, wasn’t so well networked. When he would ride into a town, he just didn’t know whose door to knock on. Therefore, he did what he could to spread the message, but in all likelihood the recipients weren’t sure what to make of it. And as a result, Dawes was much less successful in starting any kind of epidemic at all, despite having a message of great significance.

The Paul Revere story illustrates well the fact spreading an epidemic is never a mass market effort. Nor do ideas just spread by themselves. Instead, attaining a tipping point for an idea requires the intervention of a number of influential people – kind of like an outbreak of a disease can usually be traced back to a small group of infectors who exert undue influence on what happens. Ideas only reach the mainstream if three types of individuals become involved:

- **Connectors** – people like Paul Revere who have ties in many different realms and who therefore can act as idea conduits. Connectors build relationships with all kinds of group so some “cross-fertilization” occurs in diverse places. Good connectors know lots of people or more importantly know lots of the movers and shakers of the world. Most connectors tend to be gregarious and outgoing.

- **Mavens** – the information specialists of the world who enjoy helping others make informed decisions. Mavens are constantly gathering information because they enjoy figuring out the best deals in life and telling their friends about them as well. Mavens read a lot and live to give advice.

- **Salesmen** – people with charisma who enjoy getting others to act on their recommendations. A good salesman will have exuberance, charm, passion as well as knowing all the skills and techniques of persuasion which exist in the sales world.

To grow an idea to the stage at which it reaches its tipping point, connectors, mavens and salesmen are all required. If you look at past trends and events that have moved into mainstream thinking, you will find connectors, maven and salesmen have all been involved at key moments. This means if you’re interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemic, your resources should be concentrated on attracting connectors, mavens and salesmen first. No one else matters.

To illustrate how this works in practice, consider the example of Airwalk. In the mid-1980s, two entrepreneurs decided to start manufacturing shoes for skateboarders. They named their company Airwalk after a move where a skateboarder takes off from a ramp, slips his board out from under his feet and takes one or two exaggerated steps in the air before landing. The company rapidly developed a cult following among skateboarders and within a few years was doing $13 million per year in sales.

In the early 1990s, the owners of Airwalk decided they wanted to grow the company. They developed shoes for surfing, snowboarding, mountain biking and bicycle racing. Within the space of four years, Airwalk’s sales went from $16 million to $175 million. The cause of this impressive growth was not only the expansion into new markets but also an inspired advertising campaign which propelled Airwalk past the tipping point.

This advertising campaign consisted of a series of dramatic images of people using their Airwalk shoes in unique ways. These images also included the new trends and ideas which were just starting to become popular with the in-crowd. For example, to become aligned with the public interest in aliens, one Airwalk ad showed a young man driving into Roswell, New Mexico and having his Airwalks confiscated by aliens. By piggy-backing on these emerging trends, Airwalk managed to position itself as a cutting edge company which was in touch with youth. As a result, the company’s sales soared.

Airwalk initially did a great job of segregating its channels of distribution. The company put its more durable and more expensive skateboard shoes through the small, innovative skate board shops who had a reputation for being at the cutting edge. Airwalk also put less elaborate, less expensive models through the malls. This
worked well because it allowed the most innovative skateboarders to wear a different, more exclusive shoe than everyone else. And at the same time, the mainstream customers were wearing the same brand as the cool kids. Then, right at the height of its popularity, Airwalk made a major mistake. The company stopped giving the specialty shops their own shoes. With that single move, Airwalk stopped being the brand of choice for all the most innovative kids. And the company lost its main point of differentiation. Soon, there was a rapid decline in sales. This coincided with production problems meaning there was not enough product for the critical back-to-school retail season. Airwalk’s sales feel dramatically in sync with these developments.

Three Rules of Epidemics – 2. The Stickiness Factor

Another critical factor in getting an idea to the tipping point is to have a “sticky” idea – something that is memorable or noteworthy because it is different from everyone else. Normally, the stickier your idea is, the more people will remember it and talk about it. That buzz will get people to pay attention and hopefully will influence their future behavior.

Advertisers try and make their ideas sticky by running the same ads over and over again or by saturating the media so the ad pops up everywhere you look. They also try and attach humor, striking images or a celebrity spokesman to get people to pay attention. This can cost hundreds of millions of dollars to pull off on a large scale but the problem is people today are constantly bombarded with advertising messages. They just switch off and don’t pay attention to ads these days, so to get an idea to the tipping point, it’s necessary to think creatively about how to make the idea sticky. There’s always a way to make any message memorable and irresistible. The challenge lies in figuring out what that way is. It can be done.

To illustrate, consider a few examples. A social psychologist was attempting a study to try and persuade seniors at Yale University to get a tetanus shot. He began by distributing to the students a 7-page booklet which explained the dangers of tetanus, the importance of being inoculated and the availability of free tetanus shots at the campus health center. Two versions of the information booklet were made. The “high fear” version had color photographs of people suffering a tetanus seizure and described tetanus in dramatic and emotive terms. The second “low fear” version was more restrained in its description and contained no photographs. Surprisingly, however, both versions of the booklet produced the same results – a mere 3-percent of the students actually followed through and got tetanus shots.

When the experiment was repeated the next year, the same two versions of the booklet were used but a map of the campus was included with the university health building circled. With that one seemingly insignificant change, the inoculation rate jumped from 3-percent to 28-percent. And once again, both the high fear and low fear versions were equally effective.

“The interesting thing about this experiment is that, of course, as seniors they must have already known where the health center was, and doubtless had visited it several times already. It is doubtful that any of them would have actually used the map. In other words, what the tetanus information needed in order to tip was not an avalanche of new or additional information. What it needed was a subtle but significant change in presentation. The students needed to know how to fit the tetanus stuff into their lives; the addition of the map and the times when the shots were available shifted the booklet from an abstract lesson in medical risk to a practical and personal piece of medical advice. And once the advice became practical and personal, it became memorable.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

In the 1970s, a direct marketer named Lester Wunderman was competing against a prestigious advertising firm McCann Erickson for the Columbia Record Club account. Wunderman proposed a competition. He
would run print ads in thirteen media markets while McCann ran television commercials in thirteen different markets. Whoever produced the greatest increase in response to Columbia’s commercials would take the whole account. Conventional thinking about the effectiveness of television advertising suggested McCann’s TV ads would be far more effective, but Wunderman’s print ads produced 80-percent more business while McCann’s television ads generated only a 20-percent increase. What was the key to Wunderman’s success? He used a simple device he called a “treasure hunt”.

The treasure hunt consisted of a little gold box which was printed in the corner of the order coupon. Wunderman then ran advertisements telling customers if they found an order form with a gold box printed in the corner, they could write in the name of any record on the Columbia list and get that record for free when they joined the club. This set off a frenzy of excitement as people started looking for Columbia order forms which had a little gold box printed in the corner – which all of them did. It became like a game for many people.

“The gold box made the reader/viewer part of an interactive advertising system. Viewers were not just an audience but had become participants. It was like playing a game. The effectiveness of the campaign was startling. In 1977, none of Columbia’s ads in its extensive magazine schedule had been profitable. In 1978, with Gold Box television support, every magazine on the schedule made a profit, an unprecedented turnaround.”

– Lester Wunderman

The concept of a television show for preschoolers was first mooted in the late 1960s. A television producer came up with the idea of a show that would give children from disadvantaged homes the opportunity to learn how to read. She teamed up with a Harvard University psychologist and a third partner to further refine the concept. What they came up with was Sesame Street.

The original idea was to separate segments of the show where human actors were speaking and where Jim Henson’s Muppets were on screen. This was on the advice of child psychologists who said mixing fantasy and reality would be dangerous for children. However, when the pilot episodes of Sesame Street were made and shown to children, inevitably they lost interest when real people were speaking and took notice whenever the Muppets came back on. A decision was made to ignore the advice of the specialists and mix the Muppets with real people in order to retain the attention of children viewers.

Jim Henson and his team then created a series of real life sized Muppets who could walk and talk with the adults. This is how characters like Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch and Snuffleupagus came into being. Sesame Street went on to be hugely successful as a result.

“Sesame Street is best known for the creative geniuses it attracted, people like Jim Henson and Joe Raposo and Frank Oz, who intuitively grasped what it takes to get through to children. They were television’s answer to Beatrix Potter or L. Frank Baum or Dr. Suess. But it is a mistake to think of Sesame Street as a project conceived in a flash of insight. What made the show unusual, in fact, was the extent to which it was exactly the opposite of that – the extent to which the final product was deliberately and painstakingly engineered. Sesame Street was built about a single, breakthrough insight: that if you can hold the attention of children, you can educate them. What we now think of as the essence of Sesame Street – the artful blend of fluffy monsters and earnest adults – grew out of a desperate desire to be sticky.”

– Malcolm Gladwell
As these examples show, one of the keys of building an idea into a powerful epidemic is to find ways to increase and amplify the idea’s stickiness. Unless people remember what they’re being told, it is unlikely they will change the way they think or act.

**Three Rules of Epidemics – 3. The Power of Context**

An epidemic always reflects the environment in which it operates. Therefore one of the keys to getting people to act on a new idea lies in embedding that idea within the right kind of environment. Humans are influenced by environmental factors far more than they realize. To get an idea to its tipping point, create the right kind of context for that idea to shine.

Consider, for a minute, whether Paul Revere would have been quite so successful if he had ridden sometime in the afternoon rather than at midnight. In the day time, most of the people Revere roused from their slumber would have been out in the fields working or off on errands. The fact Paul Revere got people out of bed added to the drama and impact of the message he bore. The context added to the effectiveness of the epidemic and this is always the case. In other words, small details of the immediate environment in which an epidemic operates can influence whether the epidemic passes the tipping point, gets reversed or gets redirected. What really matters, in this situation, is the little things. Why? Because whether or not an epidemic spreads depends heavily on what people are thinking, and what people think is greatly influenced by their outer circumstances or environment. What people think also depends on what the other people around them are thinking. The dynamics of groups has a major impact on the spread of epidemics.

Groups foster the spread of epidemics in several significant ways:

- Groups can magnify the relative importance of an idea by making it seem like everyone is talking about it.
- Groups are very good at breaking complex ideas down into simple elements. The more an idea can be encased in a simple catchphrase, the greater the likelihood becomes that idea will spread and go viral.
- Groups create an environment where an idea can spread rapidly. Groups encourage one type of behavior and actively discourage others. If you can get a group to adopt an idea and act on it, the idea always assumes more relevance and importance.

To illustrate this dynamic in action, take the rapid decline in violent crime rates that occurred in New York in the 1990s. New York City, like many other cities around the world, had a serious problem with violent crime. Two criminologist James Wilson and George Kelling developed a theory they called the “Broken Windows Theory”. In essence, they said crime is the inevitable result of disorder. Therefore, if people see a building with a broken window which is not repaired, then they will conclude no one cares. Soon, more windows will be broken and eventually that spirit of disorder will spread elsewhere.

“Muggers and robbers, whether opportunistic or professional, believe they reduce their chances of being caught or even identified if they operate on streets where potential victims are already intimidated by prevailing conditions. If the neighborhood cannot keep a bothersome panhandler from annoying passers by, the thief may reason, it is even less likely to call the police to identify a potential mugger or to interfere if the mugging actually takes place.”

– James Wilson and George Kelling
George Kelling was hired as a consultant by the New York Transit Authority to put the Broken Windows Theory into practice. It was suggested the key to making the New York subway safer was to eliminate all the graffiti.

“The graffiti was symbolic of the collapse of the system. When you looked at the process of rebuilding the organization and morale, you had to win the battle against graffiti. Without winning that battle, all the management reforms and physical changes just weren’t going to happen. We were about to put out new trains that were worth about ten million bucks apiece, and unless we did something to protect them, we just knew what would happen. They would last one day and then they would be vandalized.”

– David Gunn, New York subway director

Cleaning stations were set up where the trains were turned around so any trains which came in with graffiti could be cleaned immediately or replaced. The clean up took seven years from 1984 to 1990, and it was reinforced by many other moves, but over that period the rate of crime on the New York subways fell dramatically.

“During the 1980s, New York City averaged well over 2,000 murders and 600,000 serious felonies a year. Underground, on the subways, conditions could only be described as chaotic. Fare beating was so commonplace that it was costing the Transit Authority as much as $150 million in lost revenue annually. There were about 15,000 felonies on the system a year – a number that would hit 20,000 a year by the end of the decade – and harassment of riders by panhandlers and petty criminals was so pervasive that ridership of the trains had sunk to its lowest level in the history of the subway system. This was New York City in the 1980s, a city in the grip of one of the worst crime epidemics in its history. But then, suddenly and without warning, the epidemic tipped. From a high in 1990, the crime rate went into precipitous decline. Murders dropped by two-thirds. Felonies were cut in half. Other cities saw their crime drop in the same period. But in no place did the level of violence fall farther or faster. On the subways, by the end of the decade, there were 75-percent fewer felonies than there had been at the decade’s start. New York had rapidly become the safest big city in the country.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

As illustrated by this example, the power of context is essentially an environmental argument. It says what really matters are the little things. You don’t always have to tackle the really big problems to solve crime. Instead, you can prevent crime just by doing simple and straightforward things which creates an environment where crime is less tolerated. Doing those simple things creates a tipping point for crime to decrease.

So what is the most effective group size if you’re making an attempt to start an epidemic? Most people would naturally assume the larger the group the better, but that’s not the way things work out in practice. In fact, many organizations have found again and again the optimum size for any organizational structure is actually about 150 people.

“Over the years, military planners have arrived at a rule of thumb which dictates that functional fighting units cannot be substantially larger than 200 men. This, I suspect, is not simply a matter of how the generals in the rear exercise control and coordination, because companies have remained obdurately stuck at this size despite all the advances in communications technology since the first world war. Rather, it is as though the planners have discovered, by trial and error over the centuries, that it is hard to get more than this number of men sufficiently familiar with each other so that they can work together as a functional unit.”

– Robin Dunbar, anthropologist
‘Keeping things under 150 just seems to be the best and most efficient way to manage a group of people. When things get larger than that, people become strangers to one another. In smaller groups, people are a lot closer. They’re knit together, which is very important if you want to be effective and successful at community life. If you get too large, you don’t have enough work in common. You don’t have enough things in common, and then you start to become strangers and that close-knit fellowship starts to get lost. What happens as you approach that 150 mark is the group starts, on its own, to form a clan. You get two or three groups within the larger group. That is something you really try to prevent, and when it happens it is a good time to branch out.’

— Bill Gross, leader of a Hutterite colony

In simple terms, once you get about the 150-person tipping point, there starts to be structural impediments to the ability of the group to think and act with one voice. Many companies are aware of this phenomena, and work aggressively to limit the size of their business units to about 150 people. Whenever any of their units exceed that threshold, they are split. A good example of this approach is Gore Associates, a privately held company based in Newark, Delaware. Gore is the manufacturer of the water-resistant Gore-Tex fabric, Glide dental floss and other specialist products. Despite the fact Gore has a multi-billion-dollar turnover, the company attempts to behave like a small entrepreneurial start-up. The company engenders that mind set by adhering to the “Rule of 150.”

“We found again and again that things get clumsy at a hundred and fifty.”

— Bill Gore, founder, Gore Associates

Having the work divided amongst small teams also allows an implicit joint memory system to develop naturally. This type of system is based on an understanding of who is the person best suited to remember various kinds of things. Gore has a highly effective institutional transactive memory in which people remember the facts that match their skills, abilities and passions. Others trust them to know things in their specialty area. Since everyone is familiar with who knows what, over time a very good system develops where various people take responsibility for retaining knowledge in their specialist areas. The end result is the entire organization gets very smart because people are focused rather than generalists. This kind of institutional memory also allows Gore to innovate rapidly enough to respond to the changing needs of demanding and sophisticated customers.

“What must underlie successful epidemics, in the end, is a bedrock belief that change is possible, that people can radically transform their behavior or beliefs in the face of the right kind of impetus. This contradicts some of the most ingrained assumptions we hold about ourselves and each other. We like to think of ourselves as autonomous and inner directed, that who we are and how we act is permanently set by our genes and our temperament. We are actually powerfully influenced by our surroundings, our immediate context, and the personalities of those around us. To look closely at complex behaviors like smoking or suicide or crime is to appreciate how suggestible we are in the face of what we see and hear, and how acutely sensitive we are even to the smallest detail of everyday life. That’s why social change is so volatile and so often inexplicable, because it is the nature of all of us to be volatile and inexplicable.”

— Malcolm Gladwell