

Charting The Course

The Tipping Point

Broadcast Architecture's Frank Cody talks to author Malcolm Gladwell

What do the rising popularity of Hush Puppies; graffiti, broken windows and the decline of crime in New York City; and the spread of the flu virus have in common? In his book *The Tipping Point* Malcolm Gladwell proposes the fascinating theory that ideas, attitudes and behaviors tend to spread contagiously in the same way as disease epidemics. An understanding of the role Mavens, Connectors and Salesmen play in tipping trends into full-blown cultural phenomena is crucial for the successful entertainment professional.

Broadcast Architecture CEO Frank Cody knows a thing or two about the Tipping Point. In 1987 he and KTWV (The Wave)/Los Angeles' launch team wanted to leverage adults' need for intelligent music with three underexposed musical genres — contemporary jazz, New Age and cool vocals — and the audience's dislike of jivey disc jockeys and excessive commercial loads. Cody composed The Wave's nine-note musical ID and proposed putting the notes and the station's logo on a Sunset Boulevard billboard without the call letters or frequency. Everyone thought he was nuts, but Cody says, "Sometimes you need to negotiate an extreme point to establish what you know will trigger the Tipping Point. Once The Wave tipped, it became one of the world's most successful radio stations."

FC: I was taken with your story "Coolhunt" in the *New Yorker* because I'm fascinated by the ability to spot trends and leverage that knowledge into a positive force. Then, after reading your book *The Tipping Point*, I thought it was so important that I bought cartons of copies to send to our clients at the Smooth Jazz stations Broadcast Architecture consults because it has such enormous applications for media.

You subtitled *The Tipping Point* "How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference." We've all heard that phrase, just as it's also said that "heaven is in the details," but what you're talking about is that movements, trends and fads don't simply pop up like mushrooms; in fact, they're organic in the sense that they are more like a virus, which you use as your primary metaphor. What led you to write this book?

MG: In 1999 I wrote an article called "The Tipping Point" focused on crime and the idea of looking at crime as an epidemic. That got me started. It caught the eye of publishers. By the time I wrote the book, I realized that crime was only a small part of the story, but it was the genesis.

I had also done a lot of work as a medical writer, studying and writing about epidemics, especially what epidemiologists have to say about how and why epidemics work. Doctors, like all academi-

cs, are very good at explaining complicated things. The idea of thinking about ideas as infectious agents is not a new one, but other treatments of that idea tend to stop short of exploring it as far as it can go. I like to think I've taken the notion further, played with it and brought in epidemiological theory.

FC: You've codified theoretical systems that need to be in place for the Tipping Point to occur.

MG: A disease epidemic is about much more than a virus; it's also about a set of social conditions. It's not enough to look at an epidemic and say that it's the result of a particular infectious agent. Conditions epidemiologists talk about fall into three basic groups. One is that epidemics are always the result of the actions of a very small number of people who are socially exceptional in some way, who act differently from the norm.

The second factor is stickiness, which is simply the idea that epidemics happen when a virus changes in some specific way. Something happens to it so that it becomes

more than simply infectious, but something that can last. You can't start an epidemic with something that you get over the moment you catch it. We don't talk about epidemics of the common cold, although it's incredibly infectious, because it doesn't stay around. But the flu is different from a cold, because it'll keep you flat on your back for two weeks.

The third thing is the power of context. Incredibly small changes in the environment in

which a virus is operating can serve to trigger an epidemic. A simple example is that epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases basically only happen in the summer, because it's warmer and people stay outside, where they meet new people. An increase of 10 degrees can create an epidemic where there was none before. All these factors also help to explain social epidemics, ideas and trends.

FC: People in media frequently make the mistake of attempting to identify a fad and then leverage it into a trend. The unfortunate result is music that all sounds the same and TV shows and movies that are sequels — clones of last season's hits — all of which are mere imitations of an original trend or virus that can't be easily duplicated. The most successful people I know in media have an innate gift for sensing when a concept, idea, product, music or format has the potential of reaching the Tipping Point.

One of the ways your book is rewarding is that it's so uplifting. You offer numerous examples of how the

Tipping Point can effect positive change, such as the way graffiti and broken windows contributed to crime in New York, and how crime declined once there was willingness to tackle those problems and create change in the environment.

When I lived in New York in the early '80s, I noticed one particular graffiti artist's chalk drawings. One of his drawings that really spoke to me was of a radiant, crawling baby; it was so celebratory and joyous. In time I learned that the artist was Keith Haring. He reached the Tipping Point, didn't he?

MG: There was a critical mass of people with their eyes open in an urban setting who appreciated someone on the edge and made note of him. There had to be a core of people who were engaged who served to spread the Keith Haring virus. Traditional thinking has him as the key figure in that particular epidemic, but it's not true. Very often the people who start the idea are not the same people who spread the idea. In the media world we spend too much time with the people who start ideas and forget those who spread them, often the far more valuable role. I say that to marketing people: You don't want the early adopter, but the one who translates it and spreads it to everybody else. It's a subtle distinction, but an important one.

FC: But the early adopter has to be there to get to the Tipping Point.

MG: Those kind of people are fascinating because they come up with their own stuff, but the opportunity for people who want to understand epidemics lies with those Connectors and Mavens who take an idea and run with it. That's why I focus on them in the book.

FC: They are the people in positions of power in music and entertainment who decide what gets played, programmed and recorded, who can push things over the Tipping Point to wide exposure.

MG: There are certain markets — and music is a good one structurally — where a small number of people have the power to create trends. You wonder how much new distribution and technology will erode that and how much that mantle of power will pass to kids who are influential in their peer groups. I'd love to have the names of the people who used Napster in its early days. That's the kind of kid who sets music trends. Their behavior is typical of one who spreads an epidemic.

In explaining and understanding epidemics, we have to re-examine our old notions of social influence. Our pre-epidemic notion was that influential people were rich with lots of education. Influence now resides in personality, not in status. We have to work harder to find those people. The kids who set music trends are not the richest and best-educated.

FC: What qualities distinguish these influential people from others?

MG: Various kinds of obsessions. Those who are obsessive about people have an extraordinarily large social circle; they are critical to epidemics because they can spread the message so effectively. Mavens are obsessive about information. They master an incredible amount of detail. They are the most important people in the modern

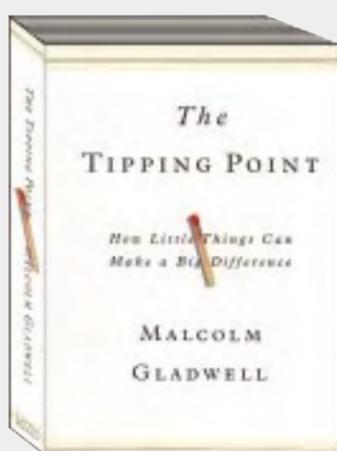
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Frank Cody



Malcolm Gladwell



"Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push — in just the right place — it can be tipped."

—From *The Tipping Point*

RON GOLDSTEIN
President, Verve Music Group/GRP

GRP is still in the business of signing new artists, but we're putting emphasis on the more established ones, because it seems to be very difficult to break through with brand-new ones. We've made producing deals with Lee Ritenour and Paul Brown; so, with Tommy LiPuma, we have three strong in-house people to work with our artists. Coming up with great songs and great production will be our emphasis more than anything else, and, after that,

supporting the tours. That is what smooth jazz success is all about.

We are looking into corporate sponsorship of tours and samplers like we recently had with Infinity cars. So many people have thrown darts at this format for not being exciting enough, for not going after new artists and for concentrating on singles, but where would any of us be without the format? I'm grateful at this point for what we have.



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world. So many markets are so complicated now. Most of us can't master popular music today, but there are those kids who are relied on by others to learn what should be listened to.

FC: One of the most virulent viruses ever was the planetwide musical revolution of the '60s and early '70s, with most credit going to The Beatles. Bob Johnson, who produced Simon & Garfunkel, Bob Dylan and many others, told me about the night The Beatles came backstage to meet Dylan. They arrived as The Beatles, but after six or seven hours they left as John, Paul, George and Ringo. In the wider world, they had reached a certain Tipping Point as the four lovable mop-tops, but when these archetypes were revealed to be four distinct personalities, something very special happened. Take the energy of that moment in time — the war in Vietnam, psychedelic drugs, the belief of an entire generation that there could be an optimistic vision of the future to which they could contribute. Where does Dylan fit? As an oracle, a prophet? Is he a Maven?

MG: He was clearly someone whose music was like a Connector, in that it reached many different corners of the world. Most of us have very narrow social circles, but Connectors belong to many, many worlds, even those with people who are very different from themselves. Dylan was like a musical Connector. Elvis Presley was the same; he broke out of any socioeconomic or demographic niche and touched tons of people.

In Peter Guralnick's book about Elvis, he tells about the first wave of Elvis' local success in the South. Elvis' impact on audiences was actually physical. People were

“New technologies could be profoundly positive if they sharpen the focus of radio programmers and allow them to realize their true role — to expose me to cool new music. You can't feed me the same old, same old anymore, because I can do same old on my own. But you can give me something interesting and new and alive.”

Malcolm Gladwell

fainting as if they were gripped by a virus. The idea of a virus is more than a metaphor. You'd have been hard-pressed to tell the difference between a disease epidemic and an Elvis epidemic in the early days. They were the same thing. Something contagious was passing between Elvis and the audience, and it changed people physically and emotionally. Any distinction we make between the intellectual and emotional world and the physical world is arbitrary. When we talk about Elvis as an epidemic, that is not a trivial or metaphorical phrase.

FC: Let's stay with the concept that a thought or an idea is as real as something identified by an epidemiologist as a virus. The Dalai Lama, for instance, suggested that the solution to the conflict with China, after it occupied Tibet, would be to declare Tibet a peace zone as an example to

the rest of the world of how conflict can be resolved. Some friends and I went in together to buy 480 acres in southern Colorado, and we turned it into a wildlife refuge. People say to me, “That's so fantastic. I wish I could do something like that.” Well, they can. There's nothing I possess that they don't possess, nothing my friends and I did that anyone else can't do. They can start a peace zone in a flower box outside their window. It's more a state of mind than a place.

MG: The reason more people don't do it is because there are a limited number of people who have the kind of imagination to think of doing it. Imagination in a context like that — married to a powerful idea — is a completely contagious thing. I hope that 10 years from now many people will be doing what you've done.

FC: I'd like to see the Tipping Point understood and embraced in a variety of ways, because it affords so much potential for social change and raising consciousness. When I speak with people in their 20s, for whom the whole psychedelic movement is something they've read about or their parents participated in, I'm aware that they're fascinated by it because it's empowering to embrace the belief that you are actually in charge of something, even if it's just your own life. Like-minded individuals can actually make things change, as you point out in your book in relation to crime, or even on the dark side, in relation to suicide.

MG: There's no question that these same principles can be used for good or for ill. The rise of Nazism was profoundly epidemic. In fact, the Nazis grasped very early the importance of mass public rituals. What was the Nuremberg rally but an attempt to infect a very large group of people with a virus? They put people in a context where they were susceptible to infection. You awe them with ceremony. There was a classic pattern of infection going on.

FC: Symbols played a big role too.

MG: Particularly for young people, those kinds of things are really powerful. I write about the rise of teen smoking in this country because it really is an epidemic. Cigarettes are an extraordinarily powerful symbol; they stand for all kinds of things in the teenage culture — sophistication, precociousness, rebellion — all potent ideas in that world. You can't overlook the importance of those kinds of symbols.

FC: I'm curious about the music you like. I'll bet your taste is rather eclectic.

MG: It changes. I came up in the New Wave era. The late '80s and early '90s were the peak of when I knew what was going on. I now buy much more selectively, mostly pop, some country and alternative. I listen to Alternative radio stations.

FC: Were you a Talking Heads fan?

MG: I was in Canada then. A curious part of Canadian culture is an extraordinary bias by Canadian kids against American music, so we very consciously listened to British New Wave. R.E.M., Talking Heads and all that was not for us.

FC: Smooth Jazz all over the world is a media virus that remains a vital radio format, but 15 years ago some of us were astounded that this new music wasn't being played anywhere except on college and public radio stations. The music was largely contemporary jazz by artists like David Sanborn and Pat Metheny, what was called New Age music — relaxing contemporary instrumentals that would be called ambient or trance music now — and these vocals by artists like Sting and Sade that no one played on the radio.

The Tipping Point that propelled my desire to put this format together was Paul Simon's *Graceland*.



“There had to be a core of people who were engaged who served to spread the Keith Haring virus,” Gladwell says. “Traditional thinking has him as the key figure in that particular epidemic, but it's not true. Very often the people who start the idea are not the same people who spread the idea.” Frank Cody (r) and artist Haring met at 1985's Live Aid Concert in Philadelphia, before Haring's work tipped and became a full-blown cultural phenomenon.

Everyone I knew was listening to it and talking about its musical depth, but it was ignored by radio, even after the record won a Grammy for Album of the Year. I was sure there were people who wanted relaxing, intelligent music that would also lift their spirits. Similarly, today in clubs all over Europe people are listening to “chill,” a hybrid that combines jazz, trance and pop. How critical an aspect is melody in tipping music toward popularity?

MG: I'm interested in hooks, what they are and why they matter. They are the most important part of a song virus. Even with a song we love, most of us can't sing more than 10% of it, but we know that one line or one little part

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Frank Cody

of it that lodges in our brain — the hook. The song is the carrier of the hook. I wanted to do a profile of Lenny Kravitz, because he's the most extreme and brilliant. He writes songs that are hooks and nothing else, like “It Ain't Over Til It's Over.” You can't get it out of your head. He's an epidemic factory because of the little, a-couple-of-seconds moments in the songs he creates. Billy Joel is another great hook writer. As a songwriter, he has more going on than simply hooks; he strings together elements in a really interesting way.

FC: Look at Gershwin or Bernstein. Their music is really a pastiche of hooks. If you listen to “Rhapsody in Blue” or *West Side Story*, the songs on first listen are seemingly complex. Then, as they reveal themselves with more and more listening, you find they're just laden with

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BILL CASON
VP/Promotion, Shanachie Entertainment

I've been thinking of offering rare and unique tracks, but this format doesn't seem to have a fan base for them. Since radio edits tend to be unavailable commercially, we want to be sure they are

available for free on our e-music site. This allows people to get the radio edit they've grown to love. We have an exclusive deal with E-Music. One of the reasons we've been successful is because we've had some really good edits.