For me, it is hard to find engaging books. More so, it is hard, I believe, for the college student to find time to even pursue a search for an engaging book, let alone read it. However, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell had been recommended to me many times, and I found this assignment to be the perfect opportunity to finally get around to reading it. *The Tipping Point*, in its simplest form, is an analysis of trends. Why do trends start? Which trends start? What tips an idea to yield success? Gladwell engages his readers in stories rather than facts to explore these questions.

A tipping point is not a phrase that one normally uses in their frequent vocabulary. Gladwell defines the tipping point as "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point." (p. 12). With the definition in hand, we can then begin to analyze why this boiling point surfaces. Gladwell believes that this point is reached through three agents of change. These agents are the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context. These three rules help us to understand why trends, or epidemics as Gladwell calls them, occur. It is also worth noting that an “epidemic” describes any trend, not just sickness. Crime, the success of a book, and trends in smoking are all epidemics that, according to Gladwell, can be explained through these three change agents.

The heart of the novel describes these three rules in depth, providing many examples for each. The first rule, The Law of the Few, signifies that few people account for the majority of the social spreading of an epidemic. Gladwell designates three social roles encompassed in this rule that are necessary for the effective spreading of a message.
Connectors are those who link us to the world, who bridge social groups, and who introduce us to others. They must be extremely connected themselves to do this. In college, these are the people who help us network. Having just gone through the job process, I realize Gladwell’s point. Connectors are vital in bringing people together for any purpose.

However, bringing people together requires more than just knowing people. This is why Gladwell places importance on Mavens as well, or those who accumulate knowledge. These are people who educate and help us to make informed decisions. Often, we need a Connector to reach the knowledge of a Maven. The third type of people is the Salesmen, those who convince us to help an idea tip. To link these three types of people, Gladwell uses the example of Paul Revere, who used his connections to informative people to influence the decisions of Concord, Massachusetts residents to congregate in anticipation of the British.

Despite being from Concord, Massachusetts, I tried to think of other examples that stress the importance of the Law of the Few in propagating a trend. In choosing classes to take at Northwestern, we often talk to others. To make more informed decisions, we want to talk to people older than us, who have more knowledge about the process and about the classes that Northwestern has to offer. To reach these people, we need to know someone who can connect us. Lastly, in order to actually sign up for a specific class, we need someone to persuade us to do so. If all of these steps occur, a class can fill up fast, tipping in its popularity due to word of mouth. This is just one example, but it is clear that social connections matter in spreading trends.

The second rule, the Stickiness Factor, designates the way in which a message can become memorable and have the greatest impact. Much of this depends on the
presentation and structuring of the idea. Gladwell notes that if a message is practical and personal, it is more likely to stick. He emphasizes the success of children’s television shows like Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues. Both of these shows not only research their audience, but they test each show multiple times to make sure that the material keeps children’s attention, and that the children are internalizing the knowledge that the shows are trying to project. This research found that for younger children, repetition is key. Additionally, when children feel they are participating in the show, the show becomes more memorable. Both of these shows engage their participants with questions such as “How many apples does Blue have now?” and “How is Big Bird feeling?” Allowing a pause in the show for the children to answer in their own homes allows the children to feel like they are part of something, adding an emotional utility. Additionally, the children can watch the shows with their friends, giving the programs a social utility as well.

This addition of participation into the show changed the structure of the show, not the message. Gladwell brings up the point that while we all want our inherent idea to initiate a tipping point, often it is the small changes in structure or presentation that do this for us. To relate this to college lives, I’d like to bring up the example of student groups. In my opinion, many people at Northwestern join student groups not only because of the mission of the group, but because of the presentation of the material, and the structure of how the group operates. For example, if a group has charismatic people, promotes social events, and has professional promotional material, I am more likely to join. Tweaking the presentation and structure of a message even a little bit can substantially increase its influence.
Lastly, the Power of Context teaches us that society changes its actions based on environment. In other words, “behavior is a function of context” (p.150). However, this change in action may not be a conscious decision. Often, we are unaware of how sensitive to context we are when making decisions, Gladwell says. He brings up the example of Bernie Goetz, who shot four black teenagers on a train in New York City after they heckled him for money. In 1984 when this event occurred, when one of the teenagers was released from the hospital, the newspaper headline read, “Led Away in Cuffs While Wounded Mugger Walks to Freedom” (p. 135). People saw Goetz as a hero, given that the teenagers that he shot did have criminal records. The framing in 1984 was not questioned, but now, in 2011, it is incomprehensible that someone who shoots four people on a train would be seen as a hero (p.138). In this way, Gladwell shows that time context is vital to understanding a situation, and understanding why people act the way that they do.

In terms of context, Gladwell emphasizes that even the smallest change can influence action in a large way. He writes of the Broken Windows Theory, the idea that “crime is the result of disorder” (p.141). The idea is that if someone seems a broken window, or graffiti, or a trashed car, they will be more likely to commit a crime. The takeaway is that in cleaner areas with more order, crime will decrease. Gladwell discusses how in order to decrease crime using the Broken Windows Theory, cities have implemented significant repercussions for small crimes. For example, one city implemented large fines for people who jump the turnstile in a train station. Like the Power of Context, this theory believes that small changes in context can have large results.

In explaining these three agents of change, Gladwell helps us to understand who spreads ideas, what kinds of ideas spread, and how ideas are sensitive to context. However,
he understands the counter argument: small changes are Band Aids to larger issues. He combats this argument by saying that Band Aids are necessary, that convenient solutions can be helpful because it solves an issue with the least amount of time and cost. I struggle with whether I agree with this or not. In my opinion, Band Aid solutions can only be helpful in the long run if they are a short-term solution with the intent of making time for a long-term solution.

I would be interested to see continued research of Gladwell’s examples. Did Sesame Street’s success with attention span last? For how long does a best seller reach success after it has reached its tipping point? And even broader: is someone a Connector forever? Does stickiness wear off? How can we tell when a Context has changed and what are the reactive steps we should take? I very much enjoyed reading Gladwell’s book, and I think that it intentionally leaves room for thought, discovery, and exploration. The stories he tells his readers are representative of his points, but the stories are not over. They are meant to be discussed, debated, and applied to the reader’s life.