

A Tipping-Point Strategy for Intact America

Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory.

Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

The purpose of this white paper is to explain the development of Intact America’s operational strategy so that its staff, supporters, donors, and consultants stay focused on one goal: achieving a public opinion, social-change tipping point.

Introduction

Historically, the Intactivist movement has been good at developing and deploying tactics, but most of the time these were not conceived with a clear strategy in mind. Too often, we engage with our colleagues in long discussions about where to demonstrate, or what signs to carry, but most of the time the tactics being proposed are just seat-of-the pants decisions, with no consideration of the ultimate goal or long-term impact. This cart-before-the-horse approach is unwise, but natural considering that the cause to protect boys and men from genital harm began as a grassroots, anarchistic social-change movement. Activists take action, and in the rush to do something—*ANYTHING!*—we often bypass the crucial step of strategic planning. But there is hope. The movement is maturing and evolving. Intact America has a more corporate-like organizational structure, where planning is a routine activity.



This paper elucidates Intact America’s founding goal – *to change the way America thinks about circumcision* – and explores how a formal strategic planning process will help us to get there. In particular, it explores what we have learned from experts on social change movements regarding the “tipping point” phenomenon—that moment in time when an idea previously thought to be

radical or controversial becomes a mainstream issue, and the movement's alternative is suddenly accepted by the general public.

Strategy vs. Tactics

People often confuse the terms “strategy” and “tactics,” but they are not the same. Strategy connotes the plan for a project or campaign, and usually involves complex operational patterns, research, and decision-making. Tactics, on the other hand, are the actual means or activities employed to achieve an objective. This mnemonic might help: tactics are about taking action, and the word act is contained in the word t**ACT**ic. Put another way:

- Strategy answers the question:
“What is the goal we are trying to accomplish?”
- Tactics answers the question:
“How are we going to accomplish this goal?”

Standing on the shoulders of giants

The bulk of what is contained in this paper derives from four sources who have written extensively about social change movements and tipping points.

- Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 2000.
- Bill Moyer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*. Canada, New Society Publishers, 2001.
- The body of work by Sameet Sreenivasan, et al., researchers from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.
- Nick Cooney, *Change of Heart: What Psychology Can Teach Us about Spreading Social Change*, Brooklyn, Lantern Books, 2010.

Below, we consolidate their lessons into a compact form for intactivists. If what you read below piques your interest—or raises your hackles—you might want to read the original works.

Gladwell

In his best-selling book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell describes those moments in time when a series of small changes or incidents become significant enough to trigger a larger, system-wide change. Most important is Gladwell's point that such moments are not always accidental, but rather that they can be created intentionally. This is good news for Intactivism. What's needed is a strategy to ensure that we achieve a tipping point.

Unfortunately, many activists and smaller grassroots organizations often assume that passion, sweat, working out-of-pocket, and using *ad hoc* tactics are all they need. Gladwell warns against such an unguided, perseverance-based approach:

“We have an innate belief that a dogged and indiscriminate application of effort is best and will work—it is not, and will not, and often is not even possible.”

This position seems to be supported by what has taken place with circumcision in America. Circumcision rates began to decline notably in the 1980s, following the “back to nature” movement, greater involvement of fathers in childbirth decisions and childrearing, and the dawning awareness that the procedure is painful and unnecessary. However, the most reliable data available indicate that the rate has plateaued at around 55 percent over the past decade, despite the efforts of groups employing education and awareness strategies, usually targeting expectant parents. Clearly, a broader cultural approach is needed – one that changes public opinion in such a way as to popularize the foreskin, so that parents in turn consider it unfashionable – if not unthinkable – to cut a normal body part off a newborn baby. *This* is the tipping point strategy Gladwell describes!

Moyer

Bill Moyer spent his life working as a strategist on major social change movements, beginning with Civil Rights during the time of Martin Luther King, Jr. Over the course of Moyer's career, he observed that all successful movements follow the same general path, regardless of the issue they seek to address, and that the steps toward success are mostly the same. In *Doing Democracy*, Moyer illustrates this process in what he calls the Movement Action Plan (MAP). In MAP,

changes in social attitudes, when graphed, follow an S-shaped curve. The sudden upward turn of the curve represents the tipping point that signals a dramatic shift in public acceptance of the movement's alternative proposition. From decades of experience, Moyer places the tipping point at about 20–25 percent of public opinion on a given issue. (Figure 1)

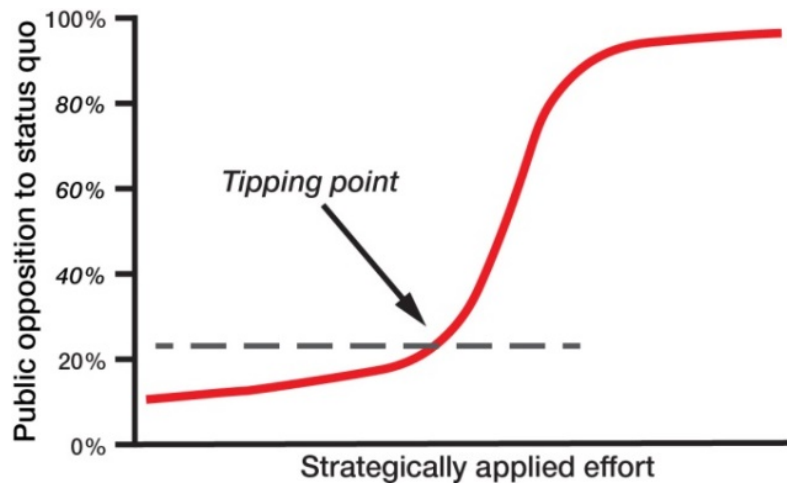


Figure 1. Typical progress of successful social change movements (derived from Moyer)

Note that the curve does not represent behavior (for example, the number of slaves freed, the number of women voting, or the percent of boys circumcised), but rather public acceptance of the movement's alternative (respectively, the abolition of slavery, achieving women's suffrage, and acceptance of natural, unaltered male genitals as normal and desirable).

Sreenivasan et al.

A research group from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, led by Sameet Sreenivasan and made up of physicists, computer scientists, and psychologists, designed a computer algorithm to forecast how new ideas spread through a society. Like Moyer, these researchers found that a society rapidly adopts new ideas once a critical level of acceptance is achieved. When graphed, this phenomenon is also an S-shaped curve, with the dramatic change in slope representing a tipping point. And, as with Moyer, the algorithm from Sreenivasan et al. predicts that for controversial concepts where there are powerful competing interests (e.g., the pro-circumcision "machine" embedded in

mainstream American medicine), the tipping point is around 20–25 percent.^{1 2} It's important to note that these researchers found that, no matter how long they let the computer simulation run, the new idea is never adopted if the level of acceptance does not reach a tipping point.

Cooney

Author and animal-rights activist Nick Cooney³ has studied extensively how ideas diffuse through a society, likening the process to a droplet of ink spreading in a container of water. As Cooney states in his book *Change of Heart*, “Diffusion is the process by which something new is spread through society over time. Diffusion can be produced by activists, salesmen, and others whose goal is to disseminate a new idea or product.” In Cooney’s model, diffusion can either be centralized (coming from a central source) or decentralized (spreading via social networks). Cooney goes on to say:

“Successful diffusion usually follows what’s called an S-shaped curve: at first, a tiny number of people change, and very gradually that number increases. At a certain point, when ten to twenty-five percent of a society has adopted the change, acceptance suddenly and dramatically increases, as most of those who hadn’t yet made the change now decide to do so. In a relatively short period of time, acceptance leaps to eighty to ninety percent, after which it levels off. Over time, most of the remainder of society gradually adopts the innovation.”

Toward a tipping point

All four of these experts, each one having a different perspective, agree that social change doesn’t occur in increments or smoothly along a steady-sloped line, but suddenly as a result of underlying and overwhelming social forces. All four agree that the tipping point for such social change happens when about 20–25

¹ Xie J, Emenheiser J, Kirby M, Sreenivasan S, Szymanski BK, Korniss G. Evolution of opinions on social networks in the presence of competing committed groups. *PLoS ONE*. 2012;7(3): e33215.

² In a private communication, Sreenivasan told the author that 20-25 percent would be the tipping point for Intactivism, too.

³ Cooney has a bachelor's degree in Non-Violence Studies from Hofstra University.

percent of the populace agrees with your position. This is good news for Intactivism.

How it happens

To consider in greater detail how progress toward the tipping point is occurring for Intactivism, it is helpful to think of new ideas or concepts spreading through a society or culture as social memes. A meme acts as a unit for transmitting beliefs, symbols or practices from one person or group to another, through writing, speech, or images. When a meme fails to spread, it is simply background “noise.” When, on the other hand, a meme is powerful and persuasive, it will diffuse throughout a society, just as the above-mentioned drop of ink diffuses in a container of water. In today’s world of electronic communication, the spread of cultural and social memes can occur extremely quickly. If the meme holds valuable information, people will share the new-found idea with others. One can observe this change in real time by looking at the rapidly growing online engagement on intactivist social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Reddit, as well as by proliferating websites and their followers.

Contrary to what many people believe, for a new idea or practice to take hold in a society, it is not necessary that a majority of the people subscribe to it. Rather, change happens when any precipitous shift occurs in social attitudes. This point is represented graphically when the slope of the line measuring the public’s acceptance of an idea makes a sudden turn. Although this may be sparked by a dramatic change in events, belief, or behavior (e.g., the “fall” – actually, the dismantling by protesters – of the Berlin wall; the rapid shift in public acceptance of same-sex marriage; and the placement of diaper changing stations in men’s restrooms), in every case powerful forces had been at work for years, moving toward the shift. Intactivism is such a force, and once a tipping point is reached in public acceptance of the natural male body, we will see a dramatic increase in the number of intact boys and, later, men.

Target Audience

A tipping-point strategy works to change general public opinion in one’s favor. This seems counter-intuitive to those who think that because the “circumcision decision” is made by new parents, intactivist messaging should be confined to

issues related to childbirth and newborn care. In fact, a successful tipping-point strategy would seek to remove the option of circumcision from parental consideration by promoting the foreskin as popular (or, at least, unremarkable) and making its removal unpopular or even abhorrent.

In the words of an American mother who wrote to us after giving birth to her first son in France, “It wasn’t even an option. Nobody does it. Nobody brought it up. I don’t think I could have found a doctor to circumcise my baby anywhere for a hundred miles. When I talked with French friends, they were horrified to hear that in America this was something we do to our babies.”

As with any marketing effort, because the goal is to change people’s opinions, it is always good to start with what a marketer would call the *low hanging fruit*—people who are likely to agree with or are undecided about the alternative to routinely removing baby boys’ foreskins. The hard-core opposition—people who firmly believe all baby boys should be circumcised—are about as likely to change their minds as we intactivists are to change ours. It is simply a waste of time to hammer away at those who are unpersuadable.

On the other hand, by focusing on those who are open to this new idea, who *can* be persuaded, and by following the basic business concept of greatest return for the least investment, we will create a growing group of new converts who will, in turn, help us to spread our message (like the drop-of-ink metaphor) to their own families, friends, and colleagues. (Figure 2)⁴

⁴ Note that the combination of those saying “No” to our alternative (they want all baby boys circumcised) when added to the greater number of Undecideds equals the current status quo; the reason for this is that the Undecideds are following the prevailing paradigm which says that circumcision is beneficial or, at worst, benign.

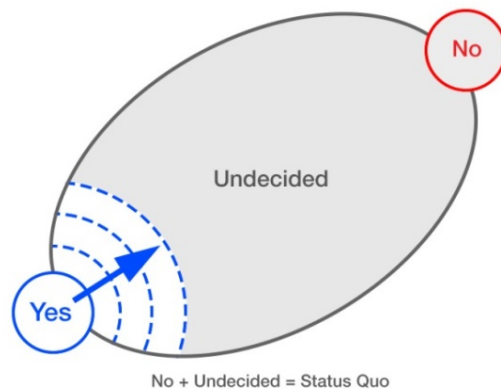


Figure 2. Response to the question: Should all baby boys remain intact?

Intactivists and supporters are cautioned about how they interpret this diagram. It is not a poll of parents: “Would you circumcise your baby boy?” Rather, it asks the general public: “Should all baby boys in America remain intact?”

The larger the number of people exposed to our message (e.g., through online sites and social networks, through intactivist participation in well-attended events, or through articles and interviews in mainstream media), the faster the adoption of the new social meme. For real change to occur, the American public needs both to become aware of the issue *and to accept a foreskin-positive mindset*.

Change beliefs to change behavior

A tipping point strategy aims to change beliefs rather than behavior. On any particular issue people will generally adopt the default position, i.e. the status quo. The goal of changing people’s beliefs is to create a new status quo, a new default position. In the case of Intactivism, this means persuading the general public to agree with our alternative to the routine cutting of baby boy’s genitals—that is, to agree with allowing boys to keep their natural genitals and preserving the rights of men to make to make their own decisions about their bodies. The history of social change movements tells us that when public opinion shifts, that change is permanent and eventually leads to behavior and policy changes, often including legislation. Focusing on changing consumer behavior on the other hand—like parents making the one-time decision to keep their newborn son intact—is a heavy-lift, one-on-one proposition prone to backsliding in the face of

opposition from others, or hard-sell scare tactics from those who benefit from selling or performing circumcisions.

Measuring changing beliefs

In 2014, Intact America hired Lake Research Partners, a highly regarded polling firm, to carry out a public opinion survey regarding infant circumcision. The survey found that 12 percent of Americans opposed newborn male circumcision,⁵ 14 percent were undecided, and 73 percent of Americans favor the practice. The survey also showed that one-third of the undecided (five percent of the total) changed their opinion to “oppose” circumcision after being exposed just once to brief messaging to the effect that circumcision is not medically necessary, that it inflicts unnecessary pain, and that most people in medically advanced countries do not circumcise their baby boys.⁶ This is an example of the “low hanging fruit” concept in action. These findings are a strong indication that reaching the “undecided” in the general population with persuasive messages can rather quickly move public opinion past the 20–25 percent tipping point figure agreed upon by social change experts. (Figure 3)

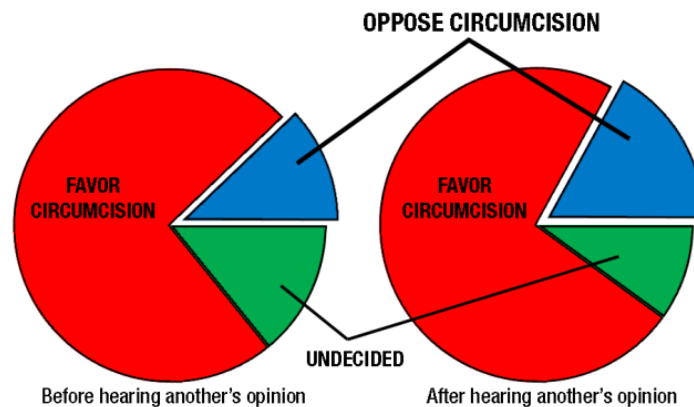


Figure 3. Proof that hearing our message convinces "Undecideds".

⁵ This figure is in sharp contrast with the current rate of newborns remaining intact (estimated to be about 45%), showing that parents do not necessarily need to hold a strong opinion against circumcision in order to keep their sons intact.

⁶ The survey measured people's opinion about circumcision in general, but did not measure their opinion whether or not ALL boys should remain intact. A tipping point relies on the latter measure.

What this means for the intactivist movement

Change occurs when an issue becomes a problem, because problems demand solutions. For social change movements, the solution entails acceptance of the movement alternative to the current status quo. In the case of Intactivism, this “do nothing” alternative is to keep baby boys intact.

If public support of movement alternatives remains below the tipping point, then society will not change. EVER! Movements that remain below the tipping point simply do not succeed. The experts are clear on this: *decades and dedication do not guarantee success.*

Strategic and tactical concerns

- **Regarding efforts to educate parents.** Educating parents to change their behavior does not harm the movement, and it can have a bolstering effect to the larger strategy of changing public opinion. Think of education as one of many tactics to deploy in a Tipping-Point Strategy. Just realize that it is not the end-all and be-all of social change activism. Intactivists who feel called to do such work should not hesitate to do so.
- **Regarding the fluctuating circumcision rate.** A possible scenario intactivists should be prepared for is that the circumcision rate might rise temporarily, even as public support for our alternatives increases. Moyer discusses this phenomenon, warning us that supporters might become disillusioned when the opposition begins pushing back; he is quick to add that this is simply evidence that a given movement is succeeding, and should redouble its efforts to ensure imminent success.
- **Regarding the selection of tactics.** A common belief in the intactivist community is that sidewalk demonstrations are the ONLY effective tactic. Certainly, a boots-on-the-ground protest is a tried-and-true tactic that many social change movements have used. But it is not the only one. In 1973, Gene Sharp listed and categorized 198 non-violent tactics in his

three-volume work *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*⁷ (with the advent of the Internet, that list could be much longer now). In Sharp's list, street demonstration was just 1 of the 198 items.

In conclusion

Social change is a numbers game. The more people who hear the message, the more that message will, in turn, spread to others, causing the number of people aligning with the new social paradigm to grow exponentially. Thus, the challenge for Intactivism is to get our message out to as many people as possible, and to put all our resources—human and financial—into achieving that social change tipping point whereby America has truly changed the way it thinks about circumcision – and about the acceptability of the normal, natural male body.

Intact America's staff and consultants should test all tactics, outreach, and campaigns with this litmus test: Does this move us toward a tipping point? If not, then revise or rescind that tactic.

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⁷ Sharp G. *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (3 Vols.) Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.
198 Methods of Nonviolent Action (PDF version) can be downloaded at: <http://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/198-Methods.pdf>