



Still image from the [Population Media Center campaign](#) video, [Power in Numbers](#)

## **Population Media Center Harnesses Positive Social Tipping Points - with Entertainment**

**Joe Bish**

*The following essay was adapted from [PMC's annual campaign mini-site](#).*

The natural world is filled with tipping points. Also called “threshold effects” or “critical transitions,” a tipping point is when a natural system experiences a shift to a dramatically new state. Many engaged environmentalists and other sustainability advocates are deeply concerned with ecological tipping points that have either already been breached, or appear to be approaching rapidly.

A powerful set of negative examples can be seen in the various fishery collapses that have occurred over the last 20 to 30 years. The Newfoundland Grand Banks [cod collapse](#) was formally recognized in 1992, when the Canadian government issued a fishing moratorium for the waters. However, the actual tipping point for the fishery had undoubtedly occurred years earlier. In fact, the cod catch peaked at 800,000 tons in 1968, but just 7 years later had fallen by more than 60 percent. Another famous fishery collapse occurred in the Pacific Northwest, where [sardine populations](#) cratered 90% between 2007 and 2016. Unfortunately, the trajectory

for fisheries [around the world](#) look similarly ominous. As does data for global biodiversity and other [planetary limits](#).

However, tipping points need not be ubiquitously dysfunctional or disastrous. They can also occur in human communities, especially around social norms – and these changes can actually be positive. When a large number of community members rapidly and dramatically change their attitudes and behavior – by either adopting a once rare practice or abstaining from a previously common one – we can say that community has experienced a social norm change. The change becomes self-perpetuating, held in place and continually encouraged by reciprocal expectations between community members.

Population Media Center is focused on catalyzing tipping points in the communities where we air entertaining dramas. On supremely sensitive issues, like early and forced marriage, gender based social discrimination, taboos around modern contraception or even family size preferences, our patient and determined approach has proven effective – and necessary.

Rather than awkward billboards, ignored public service announcements, or door-to-door campaigns with many slammed doors, our highly entertaining programs are universally welcomed by community members. As ever more numbers of people emotionally bond with leading characters in our stories, and see these characters role-modeling pro-social behaviors, momentum builds toward a dramatic change in norms.

In the Oromiya Region of Ethiopia, PMC's hugely successful radio drama *Yeken Kignit* ("Looking Over One's Daily Life") catalyzed a tipping point on the issue of marriage by abduction. Below is an excerpt of one of the over 15,000 listener letters PMC's Ethiopia office received while the drama was broadcast:

*"The story of Wubalem in your radio drama reflects clearly to the general public the harmful traditional practices in our country such as abduction and sexual violence... Our first child was married at the age of 14 after she was abducted [on her way to school]. We were worrying for years as we thought that our second child would face a similar fate. At present, however, the radio drama focusing on abduction and sexual violence that you have presented to the public, and the discussions conducted on these topics, have aroused considerable popular indignation. The people have now strongly condemned such inhuman traditional practices... Unlike in the past, special punitive measures have been taken by community people against offenders involved in such crimes. As a result, we have no worry in sending our girls to school. Our children go to school safely and return unharmed. Please keep the program on the air."*

In this case, PMC's fictional story, broadcast to an entire region of Ethiopia, ignited community discussions on the issue of marriage by abduction. More and more people reflected on the practice and realized the great harm being done to innocent girls. Suddenly, a social tipping point was passed. The power in numbers – the critical mass of people rejecting marriage by abduction – changed what was normal for that society. PMC's fictional drama was the catalyst for their actions.

PMC's mission is to use entertainment-education and mass media to promote social and cultural change by addressing the interconnected issues of the full rights of women and girls, population, and the environment. Our goals are to empower people to live healthier and more prosperous lives and to stabilize global population at a level at which people can live sustainably with the world's renewable resources.

Learn more at: [populationmedia.org/getreel/](http://populationmedia.org/getreel/)

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The MAHB Blog is a venture of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org)

MAHB Blog: <https://mahb.stanford.edu/blog/power-in-numbers-pmc/>