

Trigger Warnings
History, Theory, Context

Edited by Emily J. M. Knox

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CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction: On Trigger Warnings	xiii
<i>Emily J. M. Knox</i>	

PART I

HISTORY AND THEORY

CHAPTER ONE Like Trapdoors: A History of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Trigger Warning	3
<i>Sarah Colbert</i>	
CHAPTER TWO Accessibility on Campus: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Duty to Accommodate, and Trigger Warnings.	22
<i>Holly Taylor</i>	
CHAPTER THREE Contagious Speech: Mediating the Eating Disorder Panic through Trigger Warnings.	37
<i>Stephanie Grey</i>	
CHAPTER FOUR Gender Constructions and Trauma: Trigger Warnings as an Accommodation for Female Students in Higher Education	54
<i>Jordan Doll</i>	
CHAPTER FIVE Walking on the Shards of the Glass Ceiling	70
<i>Jane Gavin Herbert</i>	

CONTENTS

CHAPTER SIX An “App” for That: The Case against the
“Equal Access” Argument for Trigger Warnings.86
Bonnie Washick

CHAPTER SEVEN Writing Policy about Trigger Warnings:
The Experience of the American Association of University
Professors and the American Library Association.121
Barbara M. Jones

PART II

CASE STUDIES

CHAPTER EIGHT Institution-Wide Trigger Warnings:
A Case Study of a University’s “Common Reading”151
Joe C. Martin and Brandi N. Frisby

CHAPTER NINE On Privilege, Authority, and Abuses of
Professional Power163
Jami McFarland

CHAPTER TEN Trigger Warnings, Protectionism, and the
Feminist Student Subject.177
Pinky Hota

CHAPTER ELEVEN Beyond Trigger Warnings: Handling
Traumatic Topics in Classroom Discussion.188
Kari Storla

CHAPTER TWELVE Adapting Trigger Warnings in the
Introduction to Women’s Studies Course: A Case Study198
Elizabeth Tolman

CHAPTER THIRTEEN Trigger Warning Expectations:
Potential Ripples and Ramifications207
Susan Stearns

CHAPTER FOURTEEN Lived Experiences of Military
Veterans in the College English Classroom: A Case Study.219
Gretchen Oltman and Kristine Leibhart

CHAPTER FIFTEEN Trigger Warnings to Protect Learning:
A Case Study in Public Speaking.229
Kristina Ruiz-Mesa, Julie Matos, and Gregory Langner

CONTENTS

CHAPTER SIXTEEN Teaching Disruptive Literature in
Precarious Times: A Case Study from Library and
Information Science.237
Davin Helkenberg

Index.255
About the Editor and Contributors00



PREFACE

The use of trigger warnings—written or verbal statements that alert consumers to traumatic media content—are the subject of sometimes heated debates and, for the past three years, there has been a constant stream of articles and blog posts on the use of trigger warnings in academia. New opinion pieces and articles appear in blog posts, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *Inside Higher Ed* at a regular clip. Are trigger warnings merely a courtesy? Are they an imposition on academic freedom? Should institutions regulate their use? Should individual instructors decide?

This book is not intended to settle the debate but rather to provide more in-depth context and theory, as well as a vocabulary for understanding the various arguments for and against using trigger warnings in the college and university classroom. The contributors come from a wide variety of disciplines and fields, which means that the theoretical foundations of each chapter vary widely. The first section of the volume focuses on the history and theory of trigger and content warnings. The chapters are intended to provide context for the use of trigger warnings in the classroom, particularly regarding how using a “heads up” for traumatic material moved from the online feminist community to the academic classroom, as well as a theoretical analysis of the phenomenon. The second section consists of shorter case studies for using or not using trigger warnings. These range from an empirical study to one person’s account of making a request for a trigger warning in a course.

PREFACE

Readers will find that there are arguments with which they strongly agree and others that they strongly oppose in the volume. This is simply the nature of the controversy at this point in time. No matter the reader's position, it is hoped that this book will add some depth of understanding to the trigger warning debate.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I'd like to thank all of the contributors to this book. This is my first time editing, and I learned the importance of having clear directions and a spreadsheet. I cannot thank the contributors enough for their patience through all of my newbie mistakes. My editor at Rowman & Littlefield, Charles Harmon, suggested that I take up this topic, since it related to my work on intellectual freedom, and I deeply appreciate his support throughout the development of this volume. My colleagues at the University of Illinois School of Information Sciences, especially Nicole Cooke, are always there to lend an ear and talk through the stickier aspects of any controversial topic. A big shout out to all my friends in Champaign and beyond! Thank you for listening to me through all of the ups and downs of editing. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Jo Emily and Nathaniel Knox for their constant support and love.



INTRODUCTION

On Trigger Warnings

Emily J. M. Knox

At the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I teach information policy. As a survey course, we spend each week covering topics such as intellectual property, the information economy, security and privacy, and digital labor. One of the articles that we read for the latter topic is “The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed.”¹ The article, from a 2014 issue of *Wired*, is primarily about the invisible labor of people in developing countries who censor photographs on social media. However, it also includes graphic descriptions of some of the photos that the workers have to censor. The author notes that “staring into the heart of human darkness exacts a toll and many of the laborers suffer from PTSD from the trace memories of the images that they view on a daily basis.”² When I assigned this reading the first time I taught the course, I did not offer a trigger warning or “heads-up” to my students. Was that the right decision? I am not sure. The article itself does not have a trigger warning, and the photos are not the focus of the writing. Would it have made a difference for one of my students if I had offered a warning? I do not know.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines trigger warnings as “a statement at the start of a piece of writing, video, etc. alerting the reader or viewer to the fact that it contains potentially distressing material.” Trigger warnings are related to and sometimes contrasted with “content notes,” which are statements that warn the reader that the material might contain information that is of a less traumatic nature.³ Note that many people—including some of the authors in this volume—use these terms interchangeably.

EMILY J. M. KNOX

My own ambivalence about trigger warnings and other labeling statements is related to my background in library and information science. The field of librarianship has long been opposed to the labeling and rating of materials. Labeling and rating systems are part of a larger issue of social classification and the “power to name,” as Hope Olsen writes, being given to a certain few within society.⁴ Labeling and classification of materials is never free of politics and political implications. As Geoffrey Bowker & Susan Leigh Star state in *Sorting Things Out*, the classification of things constructs our life world, and all classification systems have a moral, political, and ethical agenda.⁵ For example, the “Parental Advisory Explicit Content” stickers on music with potentially offensive lyrics in many respects divides music into “good” and “bad” music. There is in implication that music with the sticker is in some fundamental way different from music without it. The latter is “clean” while “explicit” music is “dirty.” Also, note that an entire genre that is associated with a minority community, rap and hip-hop, tends to receive parental advisory labels on a regular basis. Ratings systems are less relevant to trigger warnings; like other types of labels they are voluntary and seek to inform the user regarding the content of the material. One of the most well known systems, the MPAA’s voluntary film ratings, affixes labels according to language, nudity, sexual content, substance abuse, and violence. As demonstrated in the film *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, these ratings are arbitrary and merely imposed by a small board of ten people who live in the Los Angeles area. In the field of library and information science the simultaneously arbitrary and socially constructed nature of labeling is among the reasons why labels are often met with suspicion.

Opposition to labeling in librarianship began in the 1950s when the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) of Montclair, New Jersey, objected to the appearance of communist materials in libraries. While the SAR argued that such material should be clearly labeled as subversive, librarians stated that such labeling was a limiting of the freedom to read. Librarians felt that such labeling operated as a proscription against reading certain topics, since such labels might prejudice patrons toward certain topics.⁶ It would also be a reification of the material. That is, if the book or magazine is labeled “communist,” then it is a communist book or magazine. After some consideration, the statement on labeling—an interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights—was adopted by the American Library Association in 1951. It stated that “libraries do not advocate the ideas

found in their collections” and “no person should take the responsibility of labeling publication.”⁷ Many libraries adopted the statement as policy over the following years. In 1971, the statement was revised to remove the specific paragraphs that referred to communism. It was further amended in 1981, 1990, 2005, 2009, and 2014. These subsequent amendments removed focus on legal actions and added information on viewpoint-neutral directional aids. The current interpretation states:

Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the resource, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the resource, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users. The prejudicial label is used to warn, discourage, or prohibit users or certain groups of users from accessing the resource. Such labels sometimes are used to place materials in restricted locations where access depends on staff intervention.

Viewpoint-neutral directional aids facilitate access by making it easier for users to locate resources. Users may choose to consult or ignore the directional aids at their own discretion.

Directional aids can have the effect of prejudicial labels when their implementation becomes proscriptive rather than descriptive. When directional aids are used to forbid access or to suggest moral or doctrinal endorsement, the effect is the same as prejudicial labeling.⁸

I have argued elsewhere⁹ that librarians’ acceptance of reader-response theory has strengthened their support for intellectual freedom. This acceptance can also be seen in the interpretation above that warns against prejudicial labels. If, as reader-response theory posits, everyone comes to a text with their own baggage, then we cannot know what their response will be to it. A prejudicial label will color that response and may keep them from accessing certain information. It can be argued that trigger warnings are prejudicial labels, as they warn people from accessing a resource. The argument that trigger warnings are a form of censorship seems to be based in this understanding of labeling. However, as I noted above, although my field has taken a strong stance on labeling, like other instructions, I also have moral obligations to more than just my field. I am also concerned about the welfare of my students.

It cannot be denied that some media can be harmful. In my own work¹⁰ I study why people attempt to ban books in public institutions.

EMILY J. M. KNOX

Challengers (those who try to remove, relocate, redact, and restrict material) give many different reasons for their actions: the books are inappropriate to a certain age group, they contain references to drug use, they have stereotypical characterizations of marginalized peoples. However, what all challengers have in common is a belief in the power of reading to change an individual's life. Reading is never a benign or neutral activity—we assign readings in coursework and say things like “this book changed my life” for a reason.

My research centers on what I call “commonsense” interpretations of text wherein the text “means what it says, and says what it means.” Challengers from many different political viewpoints argue that texts can only be understood in one way and that this understanding will have a direct effect on the reader. This argument is somewhat similar to the argument made by supporters of trigger warnings. However, the latter would also argue that not everyone would have the same interpretation of a text or be subject to certain traumatic effects but that we must always be aware of those who are vulnerable to such reactions. This is one way in which trigger warnings can be seen as a different kind of tool than the practices of censorship such as restriction, redaction, relocation, and removal.

I remain ambivalent about trigger warnings in the classroom. I do not wish to cause my students harm yet I am concerned that the materials most likely to have trigger warnings are those of marginalized communities. It is not a coincidence that, for example, the University of Kentucky issued a trigger warning (discussed in chapter 9 by Joe Martin and Brandi Frisby) for *Picking Cotton* or that Oberlin College's statement on the use of trigger warnings used *Things Fall Apart* as an example. The lives of members of marginalized communities tend to be traumatic. I wonder what it would mean if we lived in a world where trigger warnings were primarily attached to the works of women, racial minorities, LGBTQ people, and other marginalized groups? I do not know the answer to this question, but I believe it is something to keep in mind as trigger and content warnings become more prevalent. In the end, trigger warnings are essentially about relationship: What is my relationship as instructor to my students? How do I embody this relationship in my teaching? What are my moral obligations to my students and to the ethics of my field? These are not always easy questions to answer and it is hoped that this book will provide some context and vocabulary for thinking through these ques-

tions. In my own case, regardless of my ambivalence, I will use a trigger or content warning the next time I assign the *Wired* article.

On Trigger Warnings

In an unpublished article for MIT Center for Civic Media, my fellow Mapping Information Access research team member, Chris Peterson, describes several themes that contextualize the debate over trigger and content warnings.¹¹ The first theme centers on medical jargon and metaphors. As Peterson notes, those who support the use of warnings focus on PTSD and relived trauma while those against them discuss exposure therapy. The next theme is “informed consent,” which compares trigger warnings to other labels and ratings such as those discussed above. Supporters tend to argue that such warnings are simply “more speech” and provide information about the material, while opponents argue that such labels are a form of censorship. The final theme, “Don’t Be an Asshole,” centers on power dynamics and “organizes warnings into the ethical sphere, where proponents see warning as an acknowledgement of actually-existing differences in experiences of social power,”¹² while those who oppose warnings state that there will always be material that makes people uncomfortable yet it is necessary to learn such material in order to become an educated person.

Peterson sees two causes for the controversy over trigger warnings. The first is the neoliberalization of higher education and the insecurity of instructors and students in such an organization. It is well known that graduate students are often at the mercy of the students in their classes but Peterson also notes that undergraduates are also concerned about the effect of grades on their future careers and the power that professors have over their education. The second cause relates to how power in general has been redistributed in society and the devaluation of expertise. As he notes “the evident disruption in higher education regarding who is qualified to know and what is appropriate to teach, is another symptom of the same underlying skepticism regarding the ‘establishment,’ whether that establishment is an economic or academic elite.”¹³ In the end Peterson argues that the way forward is to have respect for and treat students as adults.

The readers of this book may or may not agree with Peterson’s conclusion and should note that volume is not intended to provide a definitive

EMILY J. M. KNOX

statement regarding trigger warnings in higher education. The contributors come from a wide variety of fields and viewpoints. Some of the chapters directly contradict each other. These contradictions and conflicting viewpoints reflect the current mood in higher education regarding trigger warnings as well as the contributing authors' research fields. Rather than detracting from the authors' arguments, these competing narratives demonstrate how our understanding of a phenomenon is informed by our own context and histories. This is in no way a settled matter.

The book is divided into two sections. The first, *History & Theory*, is intended to provide both historical context and theoretical analysis for the use of trigger and content warnings in academia. As noted, the authors of these chapters come from many different fields and present rival histories of trigger warnings. In her chapter on the history of trigger warnings and PTSD, Sarah Colbert begins with the effects of war on soldiers in ancient Rome through today as well as how PTSD is understood in civil society in order to provide a long view on the intersection between trauma and trigger warnings. Holly Taylor's chapter centers on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Canadian Human Rights Act, and the use of trigger warnings as a form of accommodation for those who have been through trauma. Before they were part of academic discourse or even used in feminist communities online, trigger warnings were used to mediate content related to eating disorders. Stephanie Grey traces this history in her chapter on "contagious speech." Like Taylor, Jordan Doll's chapter also focuses on trigger warnings as accommodations but employs the theories of constitutional law scholars to elucidate the construction of gender as it relates to the use of trigger warnings. Jane Gavin-Hebert's discussion of trigger warnings is rooted in the experience of trauma and its effects on the educational experiences of indigenous peoples who were forced into residential schools in Canada as well as the subsequent embedded experience of academia in a society that is inherently unjust. Trigger warnings are inherently related to constructions of audience and in her chapter on equal access Bonnie Washick argues for trigger warnings as a counter-public practice. Finally, Barbara Jones presents an insider's history (along with her own reflections) of the development of the American Association for University Professors and the Association for College and Research Libraries statements on trigger warnings.

The second section, Case Studies, consists of short chapters that describe situations in which trigger warnings were or were not used or requested for course material. The first is an empirical study by Joe Martin and Brandi Frisby on the University of Kentucky's use of trigger warnings for the university's common reading selection in 2015. Jami McFarland describes her experience of asking for trigger warnings in a women's studies graduate course and how this led her to support institutional-wide trigger warnings policies. In her chapter on gender and trigger warnings, Pinky Hota demonstrates how debates over free speech construct female students. By arguing for a trauma-informed pedagogy, Kari Storla discusses general guidelines for using trigger warnings and other techniques for creating spaces for learning in the classroom. The final chapters of the section all discuss trigger warnings in various courses. The first, by Elizabeth Tolman, offers examples of using trigger and content warnings for different types of course content in an introductory women's studies course. Next, Susan Sterns makes a case for not using trigger warnings in a senior capstone course on stigma. In their chapter on military veterans and trigger warnings, Gretchen Oltman and Kristine Leibhart discuss how the responses of veterans to literature have influenced their teaching philosophies and practices. Kristina Ruiz-Mesa, Julie Matos, and Gregory Langner focus on trigger warnings in public speaking courses. Finally, in his chapter on trigger warnings in a course on young adult literature, Davin Helkenberg links the precariousness of teaching in the neoliberal university to the choices instructors make in the classroom.

The two sections of the book are not meant to be mutually exclusive and, as one reads through the volume, it becomes clear that some chapters include material that might be a better fit for the other section. In any case, it is hoped that the present volume provides fodder for discussion as well as context and vocabulary for the controversy over trigger warnings in academia. Readers will have to come to their own conclusions regarding the debate.

Notes

1. Adrian Chen, "The Laborers Who Keep Dick Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed," *Wired*, October 2014, <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>.

EMILY J. M. KNOX

2. Ibid.
3. s.e. smith, "On the Difference between Trigger Warnings and Content Notes, and How Harm Reduction Is Getting Lost in the Confusion," *xoJane*, May 27, 2014, <http://www.xojane.com/issues/trigger-warnings-content-notes-and-harm-reduction>.
4. Hope A. Olson, "The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs," *Signs* 26, no. 3 (2001): 639–68.
5. Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
6. Louise S. Robbins, "Segregating Propaganda in American Libraries: Ralph Ulveling Confronts the Intellectual Freedom Committee," *Library Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (April 1993): 146.
7. Trina J. Magi et al., *A History of ALA Policy on Intellectual Freedom: A Supplement to The Intellectual Freedom Manual, Ninth Edition*, 2015, 202, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1053710>.
8. American Library Association, "Labeling and Rating Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights," 2014, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/labelingrating>.
9. Emily J. M. Knox, "Intellectual Freedom and the Agnostic-Postmodern View of Reading Effects," *Library Trends* 63, no. 1 (2014): 11–26.
10. Ibid.; Emily J. M. Knox, *Book Banning in 21st-Century America*, Beta Phi Mu Scholars (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
11. Chris Peterson, "Mapping the Concepts of Content Warnings: Three Themes, Two Causes One Possible Path Forward" 2016, unpublished manuscript.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.

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