Trigger Happy
The "trigger warning" has spread from blogs to college classes. Can it be stopped?

By Jenny Jarvie

The headline above would, if some readers had their way, include a "trigger warning"—a disclaimer to alert you that this article contains potentially traumatic subject matter. Such warnings, which are most commonly applied to discussions about rape, sexual abuse, and mental illness, have appeared on message boards since the early days of the Web. Some consider them an inkblot test of the blogosphere's most hypersensitive fringes, and yet they've spread from feminist blogs and social media to sites as large as the Huffington Post. Now, the trigger warning is gaining momentum beyond the Internet—at some of the nation's most prestigious universities.

Last week, student leaders at the University of California, Santa Barbara, passed a resolution urging officials to institute mandatory trigger warnings on class syllabi. Professors who present "content that may trigger the onset of symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder would be required to issue advance alerts and allow students to skip those classes. According to UCSB newspaper The Daily Nexus, Bailey Loverin, the student who sponsored the proposal, decided to push the issue after attending a class in which she "felt forced" to sit through a film that featured an "insinuation" of sexual assault and a graphic depiction of rape. A victim of sexual abuse, she did not want to remain in the room, but she feared she would only draw attention to herself by walking out.

On college campuses across the country, a growing number of students are demanding trigger warnings on class content. Many instructors are obliging with alerts in handouts and before presentations, even emailing notes of caution ahead of class. At Scripps College, lecturers give warnings before presenting a core curriculum class, the "Histories of the Present: Violence," although some have questioned the value of such alerts when students are still required to attend class. Oberlin College has published an official document on triggers, advising faculty members to "be aware of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression," to remove triggering material when it doesn't "directly" contribute to learning goals and "strongly consider" developing a policy to make "triggering material" optional. Chima Achebe's Things Fall Apart, it states, is a novel that may "trigger readers who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide and more." Warnings have been proposed even for books long considered suitable material for high-schoolers: Last month, a Rutgers University sophomore suggested that an alert for F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby say, "TW: suicide, domestic abuse and graphic violence."

What began as a way of moderating Internet forums for the vulnerable and mentally ill now threatens to define public discussion both online and off. The trigger warning signals not only the growing precautionary approach to words and ideas in the university, but a wider cultural hypervisibility to harm and a paranoia about giving offense. And yet, for all the debate about the warnings on campuses and on the Internet, few are grappling with the ramifications for society as a whole.

Not everyone seems to agree on what the trigger warning is, let alone how it should be applied. Initially, trigger warnings were used in self-help and feminist forums to help readers who might have post traumatic stress disorder to avoid graphic content that might cause painful memories, flashbacks, or panic attacks. Some websites, like Bodies Under Siege, a self-injury support message board, developed systems of adding abbreviated topic tags—from SI (self injury) to ED (eating disorders)—to particularly explicit posts. As the Internet grew, warnings became more popular, and critics began to question their use. In 2010, Susannah Breslin wrote in True/Slant that feminists were applying the term "like a Southern cook applies Pam cooking spray to an overused nonstick frying pan"—prompting Feministing to call her a "certifiable asshole," and Jezebel to lament that the debate has "been totally clouded by ridiculous inflammatory rhetoric."

The term only spread with the advent of social media. In 2012, The Awl's Choire Sicha argued that it had "lost all its meaning." Since then, alerts have been applied to topics as diverse as sex, pregnancy, addiction, bullying, suicide, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, slut shaming, victim-blaming, alcohol, blood, insects, small holes, and animals in vigs. Certain people, from rapper Chris Brown to sex columnist Dan Savage, have been dubbed "triggering." Some have called for trigger warnings for television shows such as "Scandal" and "Downton Abbey." Even The New-Republic has suggested the satirical news site, The Onion, carry trigger warnings.

At the end of last year, Slate declared 2013 the "Year of the Trigger Warning," noting that such alerts had become the target of humor. Jezebel, which does not issue trigger warnings, raised hackles in August by using the term as a headline joke: "It's Time To Talk About Bug Infestations [TRIGGER WARNINGS]." Such usage, one critic argued, amounted to "trivializing" such alerts and "trolling" people who believe in them. And in Britain, Suzanne Moore, a feminist columnist for The Guardian, was taken to task when she put a trigger warning on her Twitter biodata, mocking those who followed her feeds only to claim offense. Some critics have ridiculed her in turn: "Trigger warning, @Suzanne_moore is talking again." (Moore's Twitter bio now reads, "Media Whore."

The backlash has not stopped the growth of the trigger warning, and now that they've entered university classrooms, it's only a matter of time before warnings are demanded for other grade levels. As students introduce them in college newspapers, promotional material for plays, even poetry slams, it's not inconceivable that they'll appear at the beginning of film screenings and at the entrance to art exhibits. Will newspapers start applying warnings to articles about rape, murder, and war? Could they even become a regular feature of speech? "I was walking down Main Street last night when—trigger warning—I saw an elderly woman get mugged."

The "Czech Feminism Wiki" states that trigger warnings should be used for "graphic descriptions or extensive discussion" of abuse, torture, self-harm, suicide, eating disorders, body shaming, and even "psychologically realistic" depictions of the mental state of people suffering from those; it notes that some have gone further, arguing for warnings before the "description or discussion of any consensual sexual activity [and] of discriminatory attitudes or actions, such as sexism or racism." The definition on the Queer Dictionary Tumblr is similar, but expands warnings even to discussion of statistics on hate crimes and self-harming.

As the list of trigger warning–worthy topics continues to grow, there's scant research demonstrating how words "trigger" or how warnings might help. Most psychological research on P.T.S.D. suggests that, for those who have experienced trauma, "triggers" can be complex and unpredictable, appearing in many forms, from sounds to smells to weather conditions and times of the year. In this sense, anything can be a trigger—a musky cologne, a ditty pop song, a footprint in the snow.

As a means of navigating the Internet, or setting the tone for academic discussion, the trigger warning is unhelpful. Once we start imposing alerts on the basis of potential trauma, where do we stop? One of the problems with the concept of triggering—understanding words as devices that activate a mechanism or cause a situation—is it promotes a rigid, overly deterministic approach to language. There is no rational basis for applying warnings because there is no objective measure of words' potential harm. Of course, words can inspire intense reactions, but they have no intrinsic danger. Two people who have
endured similarly painful experiences, from rape to war, can read the same material and respond in wholly different ways.

Issuing caution on the basis of potential harm or insult doesn’t help us negotiate our reactions; it makes our dealings with others more fraught. As Breslin pointed out, trigger warnings can have the opposite of their intended effect, harming sensitive people (and perhaps connoisseurs of graphic content, too). More importantly, they reinforce the fear of words by depicting an ever-expanding number of articles and books as dangerous and requiring of regulation. By framing more public spaces, from the Internet to the college classroom, as full of infinite yet ill-defined hazards, trigger warnings encourage us to think of ourselves as more weak and fragile than we really are.

What’s more, the fear of triggers risks narrowing what we’re exposed to. Raechel Tiffe, an assistant professor in Communication Arts and Sciences at Merrimack College, Massachusetts, described a lesson in which she thought everything had gone well, until a student approached her about a clip from the television musical comedy, "Glee," in which a student commits suicide. For Tiffe, who uses trigger warnings for sexual assault and rape, the incident was a "teaching moment"—not for the students, but for her to be more aware of the breadth of students’ sensitivities.

As academics become more preoccupied with students’ feelings of harm, they risk opening the door to a never-ending litany of requests. Last month, students at Wellesley College protested a sculpture of a man in his underwear because, according to the Change.org petition, it was a source of "triggering thoughts regarding sexual assault." While the petition acknowledged the sculpture may not disturb everyone on campus, it insisted we share a "responsibility to pay attention to and attempt to answer the needs of all of our community members." Even after the artist explained that the figure was supposed to be sleepwalking, students continued to insist it be moved indoors.

Trigger warnings are presented as a gesture of empathy, but the irony is they lead only to more solipsism, an over-preoccupation with one’s own feelings—much to the detriment of society as a whole. Structuring public life around the most fragile personal sensitivities will only restrict all of our horizons. Engaging with ideas involves risk, and slapping warnings on them only undermines the principle of intellectual exploration. We cannot anticipate every potential trigger—the world, like the Internet, is too large and unwieldy. But even if we could, why would we want to? Bending the world to accommodate our personal frailties does not help us overcome them.

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