

## TRIGGER HAPPY

*From content warning to censorship<sup>1</sup>*

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Trigger warnings have become standard fare on some college campuses over the past few years. But they have also been the occasion for intense debates about pedagogy, classroom conduct, the use of media in the classroom, and the nature of trauma. In general terms, a trigger warning is a cautionary note that may be added to syllabi or online sites to alert readers, students, or casual browsers about violent or sexually explicit images and text in the materials on a site, in a course reader, or up ahead in a blind chain of Internet clicks. The trigger warning could easily be read simply as a protocol proper to new media forms in the early twenty-first century. However, because the call for trigger warnings on college campuses coincided with new sets of regulations around sexual interactions, sexual assault, and teacher–student relationships, they have instead become a site for dynamic and often polemical debates about censorship, exposure, sensitivity, and the politics of discomfort. In this short piece I want to explore the function of the trigger warning and the import of the debates to which it gave rise.

I will begin with two examples of college campuses where students introduced requests for classroom policy changes around syllabi and trigger warnings. In the first example, in 2012 Oberlin College, a small liberal arts school in Ohio known for its eclectic students and social justice agendas, circulated an online guide intended to help professors to avoid assigning and presenting potentially ‘triggering’ material in their classrooms (Oberlin, 2013). As numerous articles commented, most professors in 2012 had never heard of trigger warnings, let alone Tumblr sites (where trigger warnings were popularised and proliferated), and were not opposed to them so much as ignorant of their purpose. When professors understood what they were

being asked to do, a standoff ensued between faculty, administrators, and students, and eventually the online resource was removed.

In another instance, at the University of California at Santa Barbara, a student demand for content warnings on all syllabi sparked furious debates and a national conversation. In a 2014 article on trigger warnings in the *New York Times* (Medina, 2014), UC Santa Barbara was credited as the origin of the trigger warning, and the article described the trigger warning as having 'ideological roots in feminist thought'. Santa Barbara student Bailey Loverin, who identifies herself as a victim of sexual assault, had called for campus-wide trigger warnings after being surprised by a film screening in one of her classes that featured a rape (Loverin, 2014). When asked whether she herself was triggered by the in-class screening, Loverin said she was not but she feared for her fellow students and approached the professor to propose that he should have issued a warning before showing the material. The fact that Loverin herself did not feel triggered by the material suggests that the trigger warning conforms to a normative structure of surveillance. It is often called for by some people, not on their own account but on behalf of others, and in this way it conforms to a structure of paternalistic normativity within which some people make assumptions about harm, and about right and wrong, on behalf of others who supposedly cannot make such decisions for themselves.

In addition to these two sets of campus debates, students at Northwestern University protested in 2014 when a professor – writer and provocateur Laura Kipnis – suggested that new campus sexual harassment policies were unnecessarily draconian and that they were creating a culture of 'sexual paranoia' (Kipnis, 2015a). In addition to specific objections to Kipnis's characterisation of the relationship between a graduate student and a professor that was under scrutiny in relation to charges of rape against the professor – charges that Kipnis discounted by calling them 'melodramatic' – students felt that Kipnis was downplaying the dangers of sexual predation on campus and dismissing the negative impact of the hierarchies that organise both student–faculty interactions and interactions between students. The students in this case marched in a protest and called for Kipnis to be dismissed (Kipnis, 2015b).

These examples illustrate the intensity of the contestations that have developed around trigger warnings in a relatively short period of time. What are we to make of these fights? Why do students believe so fervently in the trigger warning, and why do so many faculty oppose them? Could it be that the trigger warning developed and took on meaning through a series of intergenerational miscommunications and misunderstandings? However innocent the original source of these misunderstandings may have been, it is clear that we now have a full-blown conflict over pedagogy, media, and a politics of harm.

Before digging in to the problems inherent in a culture of warnings, let me first try to outline the history of content warnings. Much, if not most,

of the material that we watch on TV and in cinemas in the United States has been prescreened and assigned a code to indicate the appropriate age of potential viewers. Thus a PG movie, to give an obvious example, warns parents that some of the material in the film might not be appropriate for young children. An R-rated film restricts the screening to audiences over the age of seventeen unless accompanied by an adult. The Motion Picture Association of America produced these ratings in the late 1960s after removing an older system of censorship known as the Hays Code. Whereas the Hays Code, which dates back to the 1930s, prescribed what could and could not be shown (you could show a married couple in single beds but not a double bed; you could not show homosexuality or alcoholism, etc.), the new ratings were supposed to be recommendations and warnings rather than limitations. Given the way that we now use these codes to prejudge the content of the films we want to watch, why do trigger warnings strike so many people as intrusive and prescriptive?

As the history of film ratings shows, in contemporary contexts, audiences do not want extensive precensorship of visual culture. Skirmishes over explicit content warnings in relation to musical lyrics in the mid-1980s (Tipper Gore pioneered parental advisories in 1985), and over what could or should be shown in museums in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see contestations over Robert Mapplethorpe's show 'The Perfect Moment') also led to often unwanted content warnings in galleries, on CD labels, and in museums and cinemas. So, in a media landscape dotted with warnings about explicit lyrics, violent imagery, raunchy humour, and nudity, what makes a trigger warning inflammatory? Unlike the content warning, the trigger warning is not limited to cautioning a general audience about what they are about to watch. The trigger warning, on the contrary, presumes and to a certain extent produces putative viewers or listeners who want to know what is to come in class or online because they fear their reaction to such material and wish either to mentally prepare to engage with it or to avoid it altogether. The trigger warning, in other words, believes in a student or viewer who is unstable and damaged and could at any moment collapse into crisis. And the fact that these calls for content warnings come at a time when college campuses are paying much more attention to students with disabilities could be muddying the waters around what constitutes posttraumatic stress disorder, what kinds of allowances should and must be made in any given classroom for students with disabilities, but also at a time when we are beginning to question the desire to diagnose every neurotic symptom.

The trigger warning could potentially have passed muster had it simply been requested by bodies of students who, recognising that the terrain of visual and online cultures has expanded exponentially in the past two decades, wanted help navigating the potential impact of new intelligent

classroom with its PowerPoints and video clips, its slide shows and media support. Had the request been for a simple warning about content to come, few faculty would have resisted; most would have complied. After all, in the 1970s and 1980s, when many of today's professors were undergraduates and graduate students, classrooms were very different places. Wooden desks screwed to the floor were the norm rather than light and mobile desks on wheels. Professors lectured in poorly lit and poorly ventilated great halls, and students wrote notes by hand and could only fact check later by taking laborious trips to the library. People smoked in classrooms, for God's sake! Visual imagery in the art history classroom depended upon carousels of slides, and film courses depended upon after-hours screenings of mostly canonical films. And now? Nowadays students sit at tables, they snack and look at their own screens. They take notes on smart pads or have note takers; they expect entertainment, and unless they are in the presence of an extremely charismatic lecturer, they do not want to sit for hours facing forward while the professor waxes lyrical. Times have changed. Professors rely upon media support. Large lecture courses are punctuated by keynote slide shows and PowerPoints, and examples from popular culture help to illustrate some of the claims that the professor wants to make to increasingly sceptical, fact-checking, and attention-challenged students.

The generational differences in pedagogical styles, in classroom technologies, in mediascapes, and in the relations between canons and experimental or alternative archives have all transformed the contemporary classroom into a wild zone where on any given day, in any given class, a student can expect to be bombarded with material – not at the pace that the culture generally dumps information, imagery, and news onto audiences but certainly at a pace that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. The student, under these conditions, can surely be forgiven for feeling a little gun shy in the classroom and for asking for a sense of what kind of image might be next in line on the PowerPoint.

There is not much controversy in the account I have just given. Where the students and the professors begin to fall out, I suspect, is when the student not only asks for a content warning but also claims that he or she or they need the content warning because they are wounded, vulnerable, and could easily experience a flashback to some bad experience from the past if images are projected willy-nilly and without warning. Most of the articles and essays that support trigger warnings presume that new modes of visual representation demand new protocols for reception. Most of the articles and essays that reject trigger warning do not dispute the demand for new accountability around reception. What they take issue with is the projection of the student as a fragile organism with no intellectual immune system and a minefield of a psyche that may explode into pieces at any moment.

This depiction of young people as spoiled, over parented, and overly invested in their own trauma, fuelled an article in *The Atlantic* in September 2015 by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt on 'The coddling of the American mind.' Describing a surge of sensitivity around what they called 'microaggressions' and a cultivation of codes that they describe as 'vindictive protectiveness,' Lukianoff and Haidt attributed the new campus climate to helicopter parenting, renewed investments in health and safety, overzealous crackdowns on bullying, and an education that represented the world to students as bristling with dangers that lurked in everything from peanut butter to paedophilic predators. When you add social media to the mix and the tricky physics of virality that skews the affective scales of often rather local and mundane events, turning them overnight into causes célèbres, you have a perfect storm of representational mayhem. And as for trigger warnings, Lukianoff and Haidt argue that they are part of a paternalistic practice demanded by small groups of students.

Lukianoff and Haidt hit some of the important markers of this new terrain of student vulnerability, but they also fail to see the complexity of contemporary student bodies, never mind their diversity. Race barely enters into their discussion, and sexuality and gender issues only appear as vectors for the new sensitivity. And this is in general the problem with standoffs between the trigger warning refusers and the trigger warning demanders. The refuseniks cast diverse student populations as monochromatic groups of spoiled children who have been sheltered and pampered, protected and coddled. The trigger-happy folks, on the other hand, fail to account for vast discrepancies within and among student bodies and they mark sexual violence in particular as the most damaging and the most common cause of trauma among students. Both sides ignore the differences between and among students, and all fail to account for the differences that race and class make to experiences with trauma, expectations around protection, and exposure to troubling materials. For example, we could argue that immense damage is done in the classroom through the casual avoidance of certain topics rather than in the act of calling attention to others. So while representations of sexual violence certainly could be very troubling to students who have been subject to such abuse, so could the lack of any and all attention to dynamics of race and class in, say, a philosophy classroom focused upon the Enlightenment or a political science classroom where issues of nationalism are being discussed. Trigger warnings presume that the real offence is in the marking, and yet scholars for years have paid careful attention to the vexing problem of a lack of representation, of silence or invisibility, or to the introduction of certain materials into the classroom only as negative examples. How does this work? Well, many commentaries on contemporary masculinity quickly arrive at gangsta rap when

they want to offer a clear example of sexist lyrics and behaviour. And yet numerous soft-rock songs by John Mayer, Keith Urban, and others convey deeply sexist messages while strumming along to a benign rhythm. In Keith Urban's song 'A Little Bit of Everything' (2013), he proposes: 'I want a cool chick that'll cook for me / But'll dance on the bar in her tan bare feet.' Okay, he wants a woman to happily perform domestic labour for him and give him a lap dance ... nice! And yet, there are few classrooms where this song would be thrown out as a quick and intuitive example of sexism in popular music. Meanwhile, Jay Z can sing: 'If you're having girl problems I feel bad for you son / I got 99 problems but a bitch ain't one' (2003). Here Jay Z is detailing the pressures he faces and has faced from police, music executives, and radio stations while saying that women are not his problem, but the use of the B-word, despite its positive context, immediately gives it a sexist tag when we use the standard of audible and visual insult.

And this is the problem, of course – insults, damage and trauma are as likely to be triggered and inflicted by what is not said or shown as by what is loud and clear. To give one more example, in a class I taught on the Holocaust a few years ago, students were appalled and shocked on the first day of class when I showed clips from Alain Resnais's classic 1955 film *Night and Fog*. The now all-too-familiar imagery of bodies being shovelled into shallow graves, of mounds of rotting and emaciated flesh, was more than some students in the class wanted to see, and they left the room. However, a few weeks later when we watched a clip from Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph of the Will*, Adolf Hitler's millennium speech at the end of the film, the students were spellbound and asked to see more of the clip. One could argue here that the clips from *Night and Fog* need to be seen without warnings ahead of time in order to allow the students to grapple with their own shocked reactions before delving into the history of the representation of genocide. And one could also argue that warnings must and should be issued before showing clips from the mesmerising, or as Susan Sontag (1975) famously put it, 'fascinating' representations of fascism that Riefenstahl created. The clips from *Night and Fog* must shock; the clips from *The Triumph of the Will* need to be stalled in their bid to seduce the viewer into an unwitting sympathy with the straight lines and orderly flow of fascist aesthetics.

And what has feminism got to do with all this? We recall that trigger warnings are often considered to be feminist in origin and connected in some way to women who have experienced sexual violence. Most of the calls for trigger warnings both online and on campuses seem to come from groups or individuals who identify as feminist. But here is the irony of it all – the classes most likely to be affected by trigger warnings are also feminist or women's and gender studies classes. Think about it – people are not asking for trigger warnings in biology or even political science classes. Very often, the classes where we might expect to find potentially triggering material being shown

are in fact social justice classes that depend upon materials that depict, discuss, or critique various forms of violence, from sexual violence to racialised violence, from war to riots, from police brutality to the horrors of slavery or the Holocaust. Has feminism taught students to be wary of representation itself? Do trigger warnings, in some way, hearken back to the sex wars of the 1980s and specifically the discursive battles around pornography led by writers and thinkers like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon? If pornography was the theory and rape was the practice, as Robin Morgan (1974) famously wrote, then in this new paradigm is explicit representation of sex or violence the trigger or the consequence, the cause or the effect, the problem or the solution? And if in fact feminist classrooms, in part, have created an understanding of oppression as victimisation and of activism as the control of representation, then what does this say about teaching, pedagogy, and the mediated worlds in which we find ourselves?

In conclusion, the trigger warnings battles indicate a new level of sensitivity to explicit materials in classrooms and online. While some content warnings (asking for some indication about what lies ahead on a blind digital trail) are quite reasonable given how much explicit material circulates on screens nowadays, we do need to question the relations between explicit representations and trauma. ‘Triggering’ as a term conceals a complex response system that operates in all of us as we navigate the world, but instead of defending viewers and students from difficult material, the trigger warning boils all explicit material down to assaultive imagery while at the same time it reduces the viewer to a defenceless, passive, and inert spectator who has no barriers between herself and the flow of images that populate her world. It is for this reason that we must oppose the trigger warning – not because we want the right to show any and all materials whenever we want but because it gives rise to an understanding of self that makes us vulnerable to paternalistic modes of protection. Will those who ask for trigger warnings to keep them safe today be more likely to surrender civil liberties when the government offers to keep them safe tomorrow? Does the triggered self fetishise safety and demand a prophylactic relation to reality? Can we refuse the entitled requests for comfort that student/clients now bring with them to the classroom? Can we still dare to be surprised, shocked, thrilled into new forms of knowing?

## NOTE

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