The Roger & Ann Worthington Essay Contest

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Mr. Vijay Murthy, Executive Editor
Weird Austin Magazine
2500 Whitis Avenue
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Dear Mr. Murthy,

We now find ourselves at a critical juncture: deciding whether or not to change our editorial policy by implementing trigger warnings for our magazine content. In light of the current predicament, I'm writing this memo to outline a few of my thoughts on the matter and propose a course of action going forward.

At Weird Austin Magazine, we inform, shock, entertain, educate, narrate, and comment on the world around us. When we confront sensitive topics, we do so in a fact-based manner that doesn't obscure reality. Our mission, above all, is to engineer social dialogue. By producing a diverse range of content and attracting a diverse range of readers, we facilitate an exchange of ideas and information on a national scale. It is important not to lose sight of this mission, but instead to reconcile our aims as a publication with the needs of our readers. Through careful deliberation, I believe we can successfully incorporate trigger warnings into our editorial policy.

First, however, we must look inwardly. Our publication has accrued incredible popularity over the last couple of years, but it has done so at the expense of thorough planning. Readers are petitioning for change because our website's content infrastructure is deficient. At the moment, content on benign subjects is freely interspersed with content that may be traumatizing for some readers. Furthermore, as Camille mentioned at our last board meeting, article titles, descriptions, and thumbnails cannot always give sufficient detail about

the content that lies therein. Trigger warnings can fill this information gap, giving readers a clearer understanding of content before they continue to read.

Modifying our editorial policy will naturally entail a few considerations for our editorial staff. Since reality does not conveniently provide trigger warnings to us, we are not independently capable of deciding what is suitable for our readers; rather, it is our readers who must decide what they themselves find suitable. We risk drawing arbitrary lines between benign and traumatizing subject matter, alienating readers who feel patronized by the warnings and hurting readers who feel inadequately protected by the same warnings. Secondly, we risk imposing one group's needs on another group. Preferential treatment of this sort might alter the fundamental experience of our website and drive a wedge through the community of readers we've fostered over the years. Thirdly, we risk a form of self-imposed censorship. Creating an overbearing editorial policy might stifle the work of our writers and deny readers the chance to engage with content that challenges them on a personal and intellectual level.

Irrespective of these considerations, trigger warnings remain a question of fine-tuning, not a question of all together usefulness. Unlike many other media formats, websites can offer individual users a great deal of personalization and customization. As an online-only magazine, Weird Austin possesses this freedom. The successful use of trigger warnings on our website will make readers feel comfortable navigating the content, enable them to make decisions about viewing certain material, and ultimately encourage them to keep returning to Weird Austin Magazine. All of these goals can be achieved while circumventing the risks mentioned previously.

So where do we start? Erin's technical workaround, though imperfect, offers a compelling idea: user accounts. The bedrock of online forums and other media sites, user

accounts keep track of individual preferences, settings, and notifications. Perhaps by combining this approach with Don's sidebar concept, we can establish a viable long-term solution for Weird Austin's editorial policy. I propose that we introduce a new, three-pronged toolkit for account holders. It will include 1) a trigger warning sidebar moderated by the editorial staff, 2) a keyword alert system, and 3) a crowd-sourced warning section.

TRIGGER WARNING SIDEBAR

The first step in the process will be for readers to create a free Weird Austin Magazine account. Under "account settings," a reader can then activate the new "staff trigger warnings" option. (Note that trigger warnings will be offered on an opt-in basis only and not as a default setting. Users who do not set their preferences accordingly, or readers who do not hold an account, will not be able to view the staff trigger warnings.) Once this setting is turned on, all published articles will feature a plainly visible sidebar listing the staff-moderated trigger warnings. The list of individual labels will not be descriptive by any means, but will give readers a general expectation for the content that follows. The trigger warnings will identify articles that include expletives, detailed descriptions of human or animal violence, graphic images or media not suitable for a professional work environment (NSFW), explicit sexual content, non-medical and/or illicit drug use, war content, severe illness and/or graphic medical content, and crimes against humanity. (The editorial board will review the addition of new labels on a recurring basis, addressing gaps or adjustments as necessary. See Conclusion.) Prior to the publication of each article, labels will be applied at the discretion of the writer and his or her corresponding copyeditor.

The purpose of the sidebar is to act as a first line of defense for readers. As such, writers and copyeditors should err on the side of inclusion when applying labels.

Additionally, trigger warnings will only appear as notifications at the top of articles; articles will not be filtered, screened, or otherwise affected on the homepage. This ensures that we do not have to fundamentally alter the layout of our website. Instead, users will have to click on articles to view their respective trigger warnings and *then* decide whether or not to continue reading. Thus, Don's apprehension is directly addressed: we allow readers to see the full universe of Weird Austin content and make decisions at the latest possible step.

KEYWORD ALERT SYSTEM

The second feature of the toolkit will be our new keyword alert system. In their account settings, users can list specific words, such as "cancer" or "war," that are known to be personal triggers. When a user clicks on an article going forward, the sidebar will run a quick search of the text and notify the reader if his or her trigger words are present. This allows individual account holders to tailor the warning system to their own personal needs without imposing on another user's experience.

CROWD-SOURCED WARNING SECTION

The third piece of the puzzle will be our crowd-sourced warning section. Account holders are invited to leave brief comments on the sidebar relating to the content of a particular article. If a user feels that the subject matter requires further cautioning for other readers, they can detail those concerns in the warning section. Fellow readers can then use these comments as an additional source of information when deciding to continue reading a piece.

CONCLUSION

Customer feedback, as in all cases of product development, will be crucial along the path to perfect implementation. My final proposal is that we institute a feedback portal wherein users can describe their experience with the new toolkit. I believe that keeping an open dialogue with readers is important, particularly in relation to the trigger warning labels. For example, if there is consensus among readers (say 1000 unique account holders) that a subject area needs flagging, the editorial board will review such cases and add the appropriate warning label to the standing list. More general feedback, of course, is also welcome for improvement purposes.

I discussed the considerations that are entailed by a new editorial policy; namely, the risks of assigning warning labels, altering the magazine's experience in favor of one group, and encumbering the internal processes of our publication. The toolkit that I've proposed evades all three of these pitfalls. Because we will incorporate our trigger warnings alongside a reader-operated keyword system and warning section, we avoid making unilateral decisions on behalf of the collective readership. These features empower users to protect themselves and make more informed choices about the content that they read. Likewise, the customizable nature of our website will allow readers to adjust their own preferences without any effect on other readers. Lastly, our editorial procedure remains straightforward and the website layout largely unchanged.

At Weird Austin Magazine, we furnish a diversity of readers with a diversity of content. We believe that informed conversation is vital not only for the benefit of our magazine, but for the benefit of democratic society. In this respect, trigger warnings are not an impediment to our values; rather, trigger warnings are an instrument for inclusivity. By embracing the needs of our readers, we uphold the diversity that makes societal discussion

effective in the first place. So let's keep Weird Austin Magazine weird, but provide a toolkit that makes readers more comfortable visiting our website.

Signed,

Stuart Railey

Editorial Staff Member