

TO: Vijay Murthy, Executive Editor of *Weird Austin*

FROM: Seth Uzman, Contributing Editor of *Weird Austin*

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SUBJECT: Trigger Warning Policy

In evaluating a new trigger warning policy, the editorial board must answer three questions. First, what responsibility does *Weird Austin* have to readers who are victims of medical and non-medical trauma? Second, what policy solutions exist that both fall within our means and are responsive to the wishes of our readers? And finally, what effect will a new policy have on *Weird Austin*'s legal liabilities, brand, revenue and readership?

In light of these considerations, I recommend we improve on Erin's promising solution. The magazine should allow readers to create user accounts, where they can design their own trigger warnings for the specific material they may not wish to see. But instead of eliminating triggered articles from their view, as Erin suggested, triggered articles should simply appear flagged on their viewing screen. This way our subscribers will be given the option of reading or skipping it beforehand if the material is potentially upsetting.

While knowledge of mental health and institutional support catch up to the needs of victims, trigger warnings fulfill a critical role in broader efforts to support the mentally ill. Instead of simply profiting off of the stories of our contributors, *Weird Austin* should also help mediate a healthy and safe experience of them by our readers. If we are unwilling to do that, we should not be publishing them in the first place.

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***Question One: What responsibility do we have to victims of medical and non-medical trauma?***

In recent months, public shootings have garnered widespread media attention. In response to events such as the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, policy makers, law enforcement officials, and public and mental health experts have teamed up to develop new ways of preventing similar tragedies.<sup>1</sup> In their many efforts though, one thing is clear: mental health is now an issue of public health. Acknowledging and responding to the needs of the mentally ill protect both the mentally ill and the mentally healthy, ensuring a safe environment for both them and their communities. The proper question, moreover, is not only what responsibility we have to victims of trauma but also what responsibility we have to public safety.

Today, mental health is a poorly understood phenomenon and institutional support to treat it is inadequately administered. Given the shortcomings of both knowledge and government, the mentally ill will need help from their communities. Victims of trauma often suffer from Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD), a condition in which patients relive traumatic episodes from the past in response to specific stimuli. During episodes trauma victims may experience any number of physical symptoms including labored breathing, chest pain, dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, and choking.<sup>2</sup> While ‘triggers’ in the daily life of a victim are often arbitrary, environments and media that specifically recall traumatic experience are potentially harmful. While

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome P. Bjelopera, Erin Bagalman, Sarah W. Caldwell, Kristin M. Finklea, Gail McCallion, “Public Mass Shootings in the United States: Selected Implications for Federal Public Health and Safety Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, March 18, 2013, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43004.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> WebMD, “PTSD and Panic Attacks – Topic Overview” *WebMD*, <http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/tc/ptsd-and-panic-attacks-overview>.

one cannot place a trigger warning on everything in life, trauma victims have found them useful when confronting sensitive media online. Feminist blogs that addressed sexual violence, in fact, were the first to use them.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing the seriousness of their subject matter and its impact on readers, trigger warnings on similar sites soon became common practice.

*Weird Austin* should learn from its contemporaries. Until now, we have not appreciated the effect of our subject matter on our readers. As we have cultivated a brand and gained a national readership, we have also exploited and profited off of the traumatic content of our stories. While some illicit industries function this way, reaping profits from the sale of videos and images of gratuitous sex and violence, *Weird Austin* does not. Trigger warnings reflect the seriousness with which we take our work, the respect we have for both the subjects of our material and the readers who consume them. Trigger warnings signal to readers that we are here to inform and enrich their lives and community, rather than simply entertain them.

While many have empathized with the medical needs of those victims of violence, rape and sexual assault, many have struggled to grant the same consideration to non-medical claims of trauma, ranging from homophobia and racism to the deaths of family members or anything that a particular individual might find upsetting. Victims of trauma, however, in all its forms deserve the benefit of the doubt. Knowledge of mental health and the factors contributing to it are continually being revised. Today, economists and psychologists are increasingly discovering links between mental illness and poverty, hate

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Medina, "Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm," *The New York Times*, May 17 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/us/warning-the-literary-canon-could-make-students-squirm.html>.

and discrimination.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, we should not be wedded to any single definition of trauma, as our definition today may be different than our definition tomorrow.

It's true that part of being an individual is learning to work through one's trauma. Yet being part of a community is learning to respect the experiences of fellow human beings. Our magazine has the means to accommodate with the negligible cost of just a few lines of computer code, the needs of those who have experienced severe hardship. In a society still struggling with the continuing violence and legacy of racism, homophobia, and poverty, every one of us should be sensitive to experiences we may not fully grasp.

Some forms of speech in our society are potentially dangerous. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes prohibited the cry of "Fire!" in a safe and fire-less theater. Trigger warnings label certain forms of speech as potentially harmful and while victims do not go as far as Holmes as to censor them, they do ask that we put a warning on them. Warnings on speech are nothing new. Movie, TV and video game ratings are all warnings designed to convey information about what viewers are about to purchase. Newspapers and magazines, however, use only headlines, which unfortunately convey little or no information about a piece's sensitive content. In the intimate experience of reading, individuals have the right not to be haunted by their past or the hate of others. To publish an explicit piece without a trigger warning is tantamount to false advertising, as consumers are no longer consuming the material they believed they purchased.

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<sup>4</sup> Esther Entin, M.D., a pediatrician and clinical associate professor of Family Medicine at Brown University's Warren Alpert School of Medicine, "Poverty and Mental Health: Can the 2-Way Connection Be Broken?" *The Atlantic*, October 26, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2011/10/poverty-and-mental-health-can-the-2-way-connection-be-broken/247275/>.

Alex L. Pieterse, Helen A. Neville, Nathan R. Todd, Robert T. Carter, "Perceived Racism and Mental Health Among Black American Adults: A Meta-Analytic Review," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 2012, Vol. 59, No. 1, 1-9, <http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/cou-59-1-1.pdf>.

Warnings, moreover, are not only aids to victims of trauma, but also essential to our rights as consumers.

As a national publication with the choice to support a movement or fall in line with the status quo, we should be self-critical of our own natural resistance to change. Every reform on behalf of minorities that today seems common sense was resisted in its own time. Our decision with respect to trigger warnings will ultimately reflect the kind of magazine we wish to be: one that is responsive to the wishes of its consumers or one that is indifferent to a struggling minority.

***Question Two: What solutions, if any, exist that are both implementable and responsive to the wishes of our readers?***

Any solution faces three hurdles:

- A) What is an effective trigger warning?
- B) How can we predict every upsetting topic?
- C) Under what criteria should media be flagged?

We can create an effective warning system by alerting users when they make an account what our trigger warnings look like, in this case, a yellow flag near the title of a piece. Upon creating an account they can manually input any topic to which they want to be alerted. By placing the responsibility in the hands of the user, the magazine no longer has to predict topics users may find troubling. The software would function similar to Google and other search engines, the user's topics functioning similar to "search-terms" and the software flagging all media with those words or related words. The third dilemma, however, is slightly problematic. What appears hetero-normative or racist to one person might not appear so to another. To this there is no perfect solution because

which specific articles are triggered in response to specific search terms will ultimately reflect the beliefs of the software designer. Therefore, in addition to the new warning system, we can also introduce users to a regular and optional survey to retrieve their feedback on how they like the system. Users can offer suggestions including ones that expand the criteria for what kinds of additional articles should be flagged. Its true that for many users some articles will be flagged that shouldn't and some articles that will not be flagged should. These solutions are indeed approximations but the risk of ambiguity or imperfect results should not discourage us from trying to satisfy our consumers and our community's neglected minorities.

Different publications and institutions will have unique responses to the problem of trigger warnings. Page-size restrictions and rising ink prices limit the amount of upsetting topics print publications will be able to cover. Print publications will, additionally, struggle with receiving immediate feedback from consumers using direct mail. University policies regarding their syllabi may require a whole different framework than the one I use here. Showing up for class, after all, is different from purchasing a product. While universities may choose to alert those trauma victims with medical needs, colleges may overlook those simply wishing not to confront upsetting material in a classroom.

***Question Three: What effect will a new editorial policy have on Weird Austin's legal liabilities, brand, revenue and readership?***

After speaking with members of the board, I met briefly with Steve Richter, the magazine's legal counsel. I informed him about the board's recent meeting regarding trigger warnings and inquired as to how a new policy might introduce unforeseen legal liabilities. Given that my solution is approximate and imperfect, an explicit article might elide the flagging process and a user might encounter un-flagged sensitive material and suffer an episode or relapse. If the user, as a result harms themselves or someone else, the magazine could be potentially liable. Mr. Richter acknowledged my concern but replied that a disclaimer warning users that they read at their own risk and that *Weird Austin* does not assume any legal and/or financial responsibility for harmful reactions to published content would be sufficient and that he would be happy to draft the statement.

The effect of new policy on our brand is of vital importance. Our brand is essential to the longevity of *Weird Austin*; it is responsible for our nationwide readership and the revenue we receive from their subscriptions. My solution, fortunately, will likely leave the brand as it was, because it gives our readers a choice to use or not use the trigger warning system, leaving the magazine (and brand) unchanged for readers without need of trigger warnings and a better fit for readers who wish to be warned of what's coming ahead of them.

Finally, the new policy can only increase our existing revenue. The use of trigger warnings on national publications like ours has lagged, and there is a group of potential subscribers across the nation to whom the market has not catered. A new policy might not only attract publicity but also steer sensitive readers from other publications towards ours, enhancing our brand while enlarging our readership and revenue. Additionally, the data collected from user accounts and surveys will be highly sought by psychologists,

economists, and mental and public health experts aiming to advance our knowledge of mental health.

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Trigger warnings are just one effort in a larger movement to support trauma victims, as knowledge and quality of care catch up to the needs of the mentally ill. Trigger warnings serve not only as aids to the mentally ill but also as protections for the communities of which they form a part. Online magazines like ours stand only to gain, as the cost of trigger warnings is negligible and as the benefits of their use can only enhance their brand, revenue and readership. Trigger warnings reflect the maturity of publications that both print sensitive material and also appreciate the meaning readers find within them. If *Weird Austin* is here only to entertain and not enrich and promote greater social awareness, then I no longer feel comfortable working at *Weird Austin*.