

# Memorandum | Integrating trigger warnings into *Weird Austin*

# MEMORANDUM

To: Vijay Murthy, Executive Editor  
From: Rachel A. Diebner, Associate Editor  
Date: Friday, October 17, 2014  
Subject: Integrating trigger warnings into *Weird Austin*

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During our conversation in the boardroom, we discussed a need to:

- a) decide whether or not to implement trigger warnings in our publication
- b) determine a standard by which we deem content “triggering”
- c) devise a format for such warnings that best suits our magazine

After careful research and deliberation, I believe you would find, as I have, that the solution is clear: It is in our best interest as a publication to reserve trigger warnings solely for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and trauma survivors, who may tailor them to address their individual needs through online user accounts.

## I. CONTEXT

To understand my reasoning, it is first important to understand the role of trigger warnings in a medical context. For most readers, these warnings are trivial. But for those who have PTSD or who have otherwise experienced significant trauma, trigger warnings can make a world of difference.

PTSD and trauma survivors often develop “triggers,” reminders of past trauma that elicit physical or psychological distress. These reminders are highly individual: While some might be obvious (i.e.: the sound of a gunshot might serve as a trigger for a war veteran), others might not be readily apparent. For example, one PTSD survivor wrote that jokes from the movie *Ghostbusters* are triggering for her because they remind her of an abusive boyfriend.<sup>i</sup> Triggers can prompt serious symptoms, including flashbacks, dissociative episodes, and urges to self-harm.<sup>ii</sup> The unpredictable nature of triggers, coupled with the gravity of their effects, makes them a very real health threat to PTSD and trauma survivors.

A trigger warning, then, serves as an advance notice for readers, allowing them to mentally prepare for the presence of triggering content. Some might see a warning and delay reading until they are in a more appropriate environment, while others might avoid the content entirely. Nevertheless, these labels effectively mitigate the shock of encountering traumatic material.

## II. THE NECESSITY OF TRIGGER WARNINGS

Here at *Weird Austin*, one of our greatest responsibilities is honoring our unwavering commitment to our readers. We must ensure not only that we maintain the highest caliber of professionalism in our work, but also that we offer our audience a pleasurable reading experience. We want our readers to wake up, sit down with their morning cup of coffee, and open their computer to our webpage. We want them to become so excited about an article that they show it to a friend and spark a conversation. But if our readers have to face unexpected

triggers — if a single paragraph could cause severe distress — that type of experience cannot happen.

Moreover, whatever editorial policy we design with regards to trigger warnings will have profound consequences for our audience. According to statistics on PTSD and trauma, triggers affect a sizable portion of our readership. Of every 100 *Weird Austin* readers, approximately seventy have experienced trauma in their lifetime, and 14 of those will eventually develop PTSD.<sup>iii</sup>

It is precisely this subset of readers that has the potential to make the most powerful impact on our magazine. It is no secret that many of our editorials focus on subjects such as domestic violence and sexual assault, areas that affect many PTSD and trauma victims on a very personal level. If these individuals can use their experiences to craft insightful responses to our articles, they could contribute in a meaningful way to an intellectual debate. Both our staff and our audience stand to gain so much from their perspectives. It is therefore imperative that we implement trigger warnings if we wish to make our publication accessible to this population of readers.

### III. A UNIQUE SET OF OBSTACLES

However, as we have come to discover, the question of *how* we should implement trigger warnings is a complex one. How do we determine what content is triggering? What format of trigger warnings best fits our publication? To answer these questions, we must first look inward, examining who we are and what we value. Every publication has a unique set of philosophies and goals, and consequentially, a unique set of challenges. Outlined below are the primary challenges that *Weird Austin* faces:

#### A. INCOMPATIBILITY

Perhaps most alarming is the fact that trigger warnings are not readily compatible with the culture of *Weird Austin*. It is widely known that our magazine publishes controversial, and often sensitive, material. In fact, I'd argue that the majority of our readers return to our website in search of such bold and daring pieces. It is this particular writing style that sets us apart from other publications, earning us a top rank amongst national audiences.

Yet because such content is so central to our identity, we would have to place a cautionary label on nearly every one of our editorials, not to mention sensitive content in other sections of our magazine. To do so would diminish the inherent meaning of the trigger warning. Such a label is only successful when used in a few special circumstances that deserve urgency. If we were to apply trigger warnings frequently, to content that readers expect and actively seek out, these warnings would become meaningless — a disservice to our readers and our publication.

#### B. BREACH OF JOURNALISTIC PRINCIPLES

As journalists, we are held to the highest standards of objectivity. As the Pew Research Center so eloquently states, "Journalism is a form of cartography: it creates a map for citizens to navigate society."<sup>iv</sup> Unless we are specifically writing an opinion piece, we

must maintain a neutral attitude towards the topics we are covering. Otherwise, we would fail to create a reliable and accurate map for our readers.

The implementation of trigger warnings would make for an unreliable map. By forcing editors to decide what material deserves a trigger warning and what does not, we are arbitrarily creating a hierarchy of importance. Who are we to determine what topics are more triggering than others? What writer can confidently state that *Ghostbusters* jokes, for example, are objectively more or less traumatizing than the sound of a gunshot? It is my firm belief that no staff member should be in such a precarious position, both for the sake of their reputation as a writer and our reputation as a magazine.

### C. MISINTERPRETATIONS OF TRIGGER WARNINGS

Amongst PTSD and trauma survivors, the power of the trigger warning is well understood. However, I am concerned that people outside of these intimate circles might mistake our intentions. It would be a shame to think that readers could interpret the addition of trigger warnings as an invitation to shy away from discomfort, especially when one of our main objectives as a publication is to challenge our readers to embrace new and controversial ideas. Moreover, I would hate to see our viewership decline as a result of such a misunderstanding.

## IV. PROPOSAL

Ideally, we would be able to reach a compromise — a way to elevate our reading experience for PTSD and trauma victims without sacrificing essential elements of our culture and integrity as a publication.

If our magazine existed on any other platform, such a solution might not be possible. But *Weird Austin* is fortunate to exist in the modern world of the online, a space where ultimate flexibility and customization is at the tip of our fingertips.

I propose that we take a personal, survivor-centered approach to trigger warning implementation, using Erin's idea of online user accounts as a foundation. Upon activating their accounts, users will receive the following prompt:

- If you have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or have otherwise experienced significant trauma (including but not limited to community violence, domestic violence, combat exposure, or physical/sexual abuse), please check the corresponding box.*

Those who do so will be directed to a webpage designed specifically for PTSD and trauma victims. This virtual platform will serve as a safe space where survivors can find our full attention and support, as well as opt to request trigger warnings. Unlike Erin's original pitch, where all users can choose to receive trigger warnings, only those who check the box will have access to this feature. This restriction is not meant to exclude individuals without special health needs, but to protect them from trigger warnings' tendency to discourage and inhibit readers.

Furthermore, instead of removing traumatic content from users' view, the system should allow all content to remain visible, marking select articles with a trigger warning. As Don noted, giving

people the power of choice is important. While many survivors avoid traumatic content, others actively seek it out, either at the recommendation of a psychiatrist<sup>v</sup> or at their own will. Besides, some content — while graphic — can also be inspirational or restorative. It is therefore important that individuals are able to take charge of their own healing processes — and this format allows them to do so.

In order to eliminate any subjectivity in deciding what content qualifies as triggering, the webpage should defer that decision to survivors, who may denote triggers via two mechanisms.

#### A. PRE-SELECTED TRIGGERS

Through this method, users are presented with a list of common trauma triggers, from which they may select items for which they would like to receive warnings. Because many survivors share similar triggers, this will streamline the process.

#### B. INDIVIDUAL TRIGGERS

However, because triggers also have a highly personal, unpredictable nature, the second method allows users to add their own trigger keywords. A simple coding program will instruct the computer to search for these keywords throughout our publication and, upon discovering one, mark that article with a personalized trigger warning.

Finally, because each trigger warning will have been chosen by a specific user for a specific purpose, *Weird Austin* will never need to worry about these cautionary labels becoming overused and meaningless. Each will evoke the sense of urgency and importance that is so central to its being.

### V. AN EXAMINATION OF RISKS AND REWARDS

Admittedly, the system has its disadvantages. Those without an account could still encounter traumatic content, while those who sign up for trigger warnings could still misuse them. However, the benefits of implementing trigger warnings far outweigh the risks, especially considering the incredible possibilities that await us in the realm of virtual accounts. Beyond enabling personalized trigger warnings, user accounts can help us communicate with our readers on a more personal level, create more interactive and individualized features, foster a deeper sense of community, and even move towards paid subscriptions in the future, if we choose. This simple change would open up a number of avenues for *Weird Austin's* growth and development.

### VI. RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

Should we pursue this solution, I suggest that we explain our decision to readers in an open letter. Because their petition prompted our conversation, it is important that they know we have taken their concerns to heart and addressed them. Such a letter would also allow us to increase mindfulness about trauma triggers and, of course, open a line of dialogue for thoughtful debate — in characteristic *Weird Austin* manner.

### VII. CONCLUSION

Some publications are admirable because they genuinely care about their readers. Others are admirable because they dare to broach controversial topics. However, the most impressive publications are the ones that achieve both, the ones that are just as devoted to their readers as they are to their writing. To do so takes a rare type of finesse, something that few publications have. However, I am confident that this solution would prove *Weird Austin* among their number.

Thank you, Mr. Murthy, for your time and attention. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Haibel, Betsy. "Triggers: Not One-Size-Fits-All." *Medium*. A Medium Corporation, 9 May 2014. Web. 15 Oct. 2014. <<https://medium.com/@betsythemuffin/triggers-not-one-size-fits-all-7b3777592121>>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Fact Sheet." *Resources for Survivors and Loved Ones*. Sidran Institute: Traumatic Stress Education & Advocacy. Web. 15 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.sidran.org/resources/for-survivors-and-loved-ones/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-fact-sheet-2/>>.

<sup>iv</sup> "Principles of Journalism." Pew Research Journalism Project. Pew Research Center. Web. 15 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.journalism.org/resources/principles-of-journalism/>>.

<sup>v</sup> "What is PTSD?" U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Web. 15 Oct. 2014. <<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/PTSD-overview/basics/what-is-ptsd.asp>>. See explanation of exposure therapy.