



Trigger Warnings: History, Theory, Context

Editor _ Emily J. M. Knox

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Reviewer _ Martin Garnar, Dean, Kraemer Family Library, University of Colorado, Colorado Springs.

Since its emergence as a complicated and controversial topic in higher education, trigger warnings have spread beyond academia into popular culture. To be “triggered” has entered the vernacular, and usually with negative connotations about the sensibilities of the one being triggered. Emily Knox’s timely book provides multiple viewpoints on trigger warnings within the context of how trauma and its aftereffects impact the educational process, while also exploring the potentially negative impact of trigger warnings on intellectual freedom. Through a combination of theoretical essays, historical examinations, and case studies, this collection of essays provides a variety of perspectives that, in combination, will challenge any reader’s preconceptions about the topic.

The first section of the book starts with an essay by Sarah Colbert on the history of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including how the concept of trigger warnings (also known as content notes or content warnings) spread from its initial usage in medical circles to the internet in an attempt to identify content that might be problematic for users with a history of trauma. Though Colbert acknowledges that there are intellectual freedom concerns when trigger warnings are mandated, or that some faculty have shied away from content based on student complaints about what they deem to be offensive, she advocates for trigger warning as “necessary and helpful” for some people, as it prepares them to engage with the content, not avoid it. The next essay, by Holly Taylor, continues the argument for trigger warnings as a necessary and appropriate accommodation for those living with PTSD. While she situates her arguments in the context of protections guaranteed by the Canadian Human Rights Commission, readers in other countries would be wise to investigate whether they would be subject to a similar legal obligation under their own laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act. Stephanie Houston Grey’s essay, “Contagious Speech,” moves the debate away from PTSD and into eating disorders with her examination of how clinicians have forced the use of trigger warnings and even the wholesale removal of content based on the contagion concept of how eating disorders can spread. Though Grey

incorrectly asserts that the voluntary removal of content by internet providers was a violation of the First Amendment (since the government wasn’t involved, neither was the First Amendment), she does highlight the challenges faced by those promoting unpopular, though still legal, speech. Ultimately, she argues against trigger warnings in this context, as “any strategy that seeks to limit access or silence dialogue can only be counterproductive, as it ignores the fundamental nature of conditions that thrive in isolation.”

The next two essays in the historical and theoretical section focus on the connection between gender and trigger warnings, though they come to different conclusions. Jordan Doll explores how the equal protection clause could be invoked by examining two different legal theories regarding trigger warnings as an accommodation, but ultimately states her concerns that arguing for special consideration of women in this instance would weaken arguments for equal treatment of women in other arenas, such as equal pay. Meanwhile, returning to the Canadian context, Jane Gavin-Herbert’s essay concludes that a rejection of trigger warnings as a necessary accommodation will continue to prop up the misogynistic, colonial culture that devalues indigenous ways of knowing. In the penultimate essay in this section, Bonnie Washick expands on Colbert’s earlier coverage of how trigger warnings took root on the internet before proposing a thought experiment of a trigger warning app that would allow users to pre-identify potentially problematic content before interacting with it. Washick then uses the example of the app to critically examine the use of trigger warnings from an equal access argument and follows that with a proposal to approach trigger warnings as a counter-public practice that would have the effect of “clarifying goals [of trigger warnings] and illuminating possible alliances.” Barbara Jones closes the first section of the book with her account of how the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the American Library Association (ALA) developed policy statements on trigger warnings. Jones likens trigger warnings to book banning, suggesting that while the would-be censors of books are often altruistic



in their motivations, such as protecting children, any barrier to information is ultimately harmful. The AAUP statement included as an appendix to Jones's essay is the same one quoted by Gavin-Herbert as an example of the educational system's brokenness, thus illustrating the wide range of perspectives presented in the first section.

The book's second section is composed of nine case studies involving trigger warnings. All case studies come from the world of higher education, and each presents a unique point of view. There are lessons learned from the inclusion of a trigger warning in an all-campus reading program. A student details the problems she faced after suggesting that a content warning be provided for a specific reading in future iterations of the course (and, modeling her own beliefs about the efficacy of content warnings, included one for her chapter). Two incidents at Smith College involving invited speakers (one who came; one who withdrew) provide an opportunity to go beyond trigger warnings and explore how arguments about academic freedom often ignore the motives of student activists and, in some cases, willfully misinterpret the desire for more engagement with a topic as a demand to be sheltered from ideas that prick their comfort. An instructor details the tools she uses in addition to trigger warnings when addressing traumatic topics in the classroom. One professor reflects on her successful use of content warnings throughout her career while another makes the case that her avoidance of such warnings has resulted in better

learning outcomes for her students. Experiences with military veterans in the classroom cause two English faculty to consider adopting trigger warnings in the future. Public speaking courses are held up as an appropriate venue for trigger warnings. Finally, an instructor grapples with his internal conflict over using trigger warnings in graduate courses in library and information science, as the discipline's enduring focus on intellectual freedom is not a natural complement to content warnings. Like the historical and theoretical essays in the first section, these case studies draw from such a breadth of experience and perspective that the reader is left with more questions than answers about trigger warnings.

Spoken like a true librarian, Knox closes her introduction by stating that "readers will have to come to their own conclusions regarding the debate." Indeed, on any topic, librarians aim to provide information and let the readers decide for themselves. In the case of trigger warnings, the question remains as to whether they interfere with a reader's ability to make a determination without prejudice or whether they provide a necessary tool for those readers whose lived experiences have impacted the way they need to interact with information. After reading this book, it's clear that the jury is still out. Knox should be commended for compiling such a compelling collection of essays and case studies that really forces the reader to think critically about trigger warnings.

Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World

Author _ Meridith Broussard

Publisher _ MIT Press, 2018. 248 p. Cloth. \$24.95. ISBN: 978-0-262-03800-3.

Reviewer _ Clem Guthro, Independent Librarian.

Broussard, an assistant professor at New York University's Arthur L Carter Journalism Institute, has written an accessible book on Artificial Intelligence's (AI) grip on people's imagination. In twelve short chapters, she lays out a cautionary narrative on the limits of AI and technology in general. Her book joins several other recent volumes that attempt to show the limits of AI and the ethical implications of wholesale and blind adoption of AI to solve the world's problems. These include M. Tegmark. *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, 2018; J. Aoun. *Robot-Proof: Higher Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*, 2017; M. Boden. *Artificial Intelligence: A Very Short Introduction*, 2018; and H. Collins. *Artificial Intelligence: Against Humanity's Surrender to Computers*, 2018.

Computers grew up in the idealism of the 1960's counterculture, creating an idealism that an online world would be better, more just, and equitable. Broussard argues that the promises of technology are out of sync with what technology can achieve. Her caution is not Ludditism but a recognition that all computing is math-based and there are limits to what math can do. We have fallen for technochauvinism, a belief that technology is always the best solution. Technochauvinism incorporates technolibertarian values including the idea that computers are more objective and unbiased because they reduce everything to a mathematical certainty. Using technology alone to solve social problems, we reproduce many of the discriminatory and inequitable outcomes we currently face.