

## Whose finger should be on the trigger?

Sarah Glatte explores the controversy over trigger warnings and asks whether they help or hinder free speech.



**WARNING:**  
**Viewer Discretion is Advised.**

Anxiety, nightmares, and intense physical reactions are just a few of the [symptoms](#) of [post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD). Among women, one of the most [common causes](#) of PTSD is experience of sexual violence. For those affected, reminders of the abuse can trigger traumatic flashbacks. In this context, [trigger warnings](#) have come to be known as brief notices posted in the titles or introductory paragraphs of online articles to flag up potentially triggering language or images. Trigger warnings are said to have first appeared in internet support forums or on feminist blogs. In such settings, they were seen as a means to facilitate the [uninhibited exchange of thoughts and experiences](#) and thus to “[liberate speech](#)” among survivors of sexual violence or others affected by PTSD. This hardly sounds controversial. What could be the harm in alerting readers to content that may likely be distressing for them?

Yet, in 2014, trigger warnings rose to nationwide attention in the United States due to fears that they could undermine free speech. Several university student groups across the country had campaigned for the inclusion of trigger warnings in the syllabi of literary courses and lectures. Newspapers and magazines as influential as [The New York Times](#) or [The New Yorker](#) soon

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covered the issue in their publications. Growing demands for a general introduction of trigger warnings were accompanied by discussions around a qualitative expansion of the concept. While they are still most commonly associated to content relating to sexual violence or abuse, some (such as students at Oberlin in Ohio) have [called](#) for trigger warnings to be applied to a wider range of issues of “privilege and oppression” including “racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism (...) colonialism, religious persecution” and so forth.

For many free speech advocates, this development has given cause for concern. The blanket use of trigger warnings it has been argued, could lead people to categorically avoid [particular types of conversations](#) and thus undermine their exposure to different viewpoints, both online and on university campuses. It is difficult to judge if such fears are substantiated. For those in favour of trigger warnings, they are seen as akin to [food labelling](#) or film classifications, in that they provide readers with information that helps them assess the suitability of the content they are about to engage with. One of the positive repercussions of the discussion around trigger warnings is that it has also helped to gain [greater recognition](#) for marginalised groups and survivors of sexual violence in public discourse. The [basic principle of our Free Speech Debate project](#) highlights that the ability to freely express yourself is intertwined with social power. Striving for greater awareness and empathy of different groups should thus ultimately bolster freedom of speech.

However, as [Jenny Jarvie](#) argues in the [New Republic](#), “engaging with ideas involves risk and slapping warnings on them only undermines the principle of intellectual exploration”. Moreover, while trigger warnings seek to benefit those who feel vulnerable, they could just as likely lead to an “[arms race](#)” between different groups who feel that their “[particular, politicised sensitivities](#)” should be recognised as potential triggers. From a medical perspective, the list of words, images, or even smells and sounds which can trigger anxiety attacks is as [varied](#) as the [events](#) which can cause PTSD in the first place. As [one commentator noted](#), “once we start imposing alerts on the basis of potential trauma, where do we stop? (...) There is no rational basis for applying warnings because there is no objective measure of words' potential harm”.

What troubles me most about the current debate around trigger warnings is not the demand for the recognition of a greater number of potential triggers so much as the demands to *impose* trigger warnings on different types of content. It is one thing to *choose* to provide notices for particular groups to shield them from harm, but it is quite another to be obligated to do so, particularly in light of the scarcity of [scientific justification](#) for the use of trigger warnings or the lack of any objective method for their categorisation. We do not have the right not to be offended, nor do we have the right not to come across content that we may find distressing. Informally used, trigger warnings are certainly a [valuable tool](#) for online forums or “[dedicated therapeutic spaces](#)”. In the public sphere, however, the potential chilling effects of imposed regulations far outweigh their benefits.

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