

WARNING! Sensitive Content Ahead: Conceptualizing Content Warnings as a Form of Trauma-Informed Archiving

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ABSTRACT

LIS education programs are designed to ensure students gain mastery of technical, managerial, reference, and other skills needed in day-to-day work in library and archives collections. However, LIS pedagogy may not fully prepare students to handle moments when that work becomes personal and traumatic. While liberatory practices may be a goal that individual LIS educators are working towards, current LIS education programs are rarely designed with consideration for individual students' identities, experiences, and emotional needs. This paper conceptualizes content warnings as tools for mitigating harmful reactions to archival materials. However, for any harm-reduction tool to be effective in the LIS work setting, both the uses and limitations of the tool should be critically examined and taught in the LIS classroom.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Archival arrangement and description; Information ethics; Information use.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Content warnings; Trauma-informed archiving; Archival description.

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INTRODUCTION

Content Warning:

The introduction of this paper discusses the authors' personal experiences handling archival materials that evoked trauma responses. Materials mentioned include records about the AIDS crisis and records about the Bosnian genocide. The section also discusses grief for the dead. This content is included in order to explain the motivation for writing this paper.

Purpose:

LIS education programs are designed to ensure mastery of technical, managerial, reference, and domain skills needed in the LIS workplace. However, LIS pedagogy may not fully prepare students to handle moments when professional work becomes personal and traumatic. Both authors of this conceptual and exploratory paper experienced trauma responses when processing archival collections as student employees in university libraries. The first author's first student job as a student metadata assistant required that they analyze digitized video footage from the height of the AIDS crisis, about the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The job included examining heartbreaking recordings of interviews, documentaries, and other videos discussing the quilt and breaking down into tears watching a recording of a musical stage play about the quilt. Though they were given instructions on how to create metadata and process these materials, the author didn't know how to deal with the grief for the people on the screen, who were likely already dead. Similarly, the second author worked in an academic archive while getting her LIS master's degree. She came to the US as a refugee, and her childhood experiences in Bosnia and Croatia gave her the language skills and contextual knowledge necessary to process archival materials about the Bosnian genocide. However, these experiences also made archival processing deeply personal. Though her classes taught her how to ensure intellectual and physical control of the collection, they did not prepare her for how to deal with war flashbacks when reading correspondence about refugee children who shared her experiences.

While liberatory practices may be a goal that individual LIS educators are working towards, current LIS education programs are rarely designed with consideration for individual students' identities, experiences, and emotional needs. This paper conceptualizes content warnings as tools for mitigating harmful reactions to archival materials. However, for any harm-reduction tool to be effective in the LIS work setting, both the uses and limitations of the tool should be critically examined and taught in the LIS classroom.

BACKGROUND

What is a Content Warning?

Archives and digital libraries working to introduce more trauma-informed practices for their users often do so through content warnings, also referred to as content statements. A content warning is a message directed to users with the purpose of informing them of the

potentially harmful nature of the content they would be viewing if they were to proceed past the warning (Recollection Wisconsin, 2020).

While the origins of content warnings have roots in censorship through the Hays Code and the film and music industries (Rogers, 2023, p. 2), the rise of Web 2.0 technologies has also given rise to social media site users utilizing content and trigger warnings about the content they post.¹ These warnings often appear at the beginning of a post or video and inform the viewer that the content that will be discussed contains specific topics that may be harmful to users. The user-driven website, *Archive of Our Own* (AO3), has its own system of content warnings they call “archive warnings” where writers can choose to warn readers about the type of content their work may contain. Writers can also choose to opt out of providing a warning or state that no warning applies (Archive of Our Own, 2024).

Archival Collection Content Warning Guidelines

While the International Council on Archives (ICA) does not have definitive guidelines, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and Recollection Wisconsin have guidelines for content warnings for the documentation of archival materials. Some universities, including the University of Michigan and Stanford University, have guidelines for implementing content warnings in their teaching curricula. While the University of Michigan had the most exhaustive list of sensitive topics that could warrant needing a content warning, the institutions, except for Recollection Wisconsin which did not specifically list any topics, just examples, agreed on several common sensitive topics. The most repeated topics were: types of abuse and sexual violence, self-harm and suicide, eating disorders and body shaming, sexism, war and violence, pornographic content and sexual activity, death, hate speech (homophobia, transphobia, antisemitism, xenophobia, etc.), animal cruelty, and mental illness and ableism (Recollection Wisconsin, 2020; Stanford University Graduate School of Business, 2023; Tulane Libraries, 2024).

While each institution gave advice or instructions on how to implement a content warning, they each had different contexts for where the warnings would be implemented. The instructions from Michigan University are aimed at instructors implementing warnings in learning settings, such as in the classroom or for assignments. The advice from Stanford University includes an emphasis that “[c]ontent notices are not intended to permit students to skip class or censor your material” (Stanford University Graduate School of Business, 2023). Recollection Wisconsin’s advice and instructions are aimed at archival workers and include examples from other libraries (Recollection Wisconsin, 2020). Finally, the advice from the SAA

¹ For the purpose of this essay, the term “trigger warning” will specifically refer to a warning intended to notify those with epilepsy, PTSD, and other fear disorders that a specific trigger will be present in the content that follows, such as the sounds of gunshots or explosions or bright and flashing lights. “Content warning” on the other hand, is a broader term for an alert meant to encompass a variety of potentially harmful or sensitive material (Language Please, 2024).

and Tulane University, while targeted at archival workers, does not give specific instructions other than providing an example blanket statement from Tulane University Libraries (Tulane Libraries, 2024, pp. 9-11). These instructions are also only a part of a larger document outlining the guidelines for inclusive and reparative archival description for the university's libraries and archives.

A content *statement*, as opposed to a content *warning*, is a blanket statement meant to acknowledge the historical value and context of an object (folder, exhibition, collection, etc.) without recognizing the potential harm it could cause. Some examples of content statements can be seen on the websites of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the University of Pittsburgh Library System. While NARA provides a blanket statement for potential harm for its entire holdings, it does not give warnings for specific items or collections on its website (National Archives, 2022). Meanwhile, the University of Pittsburgh Libraries does note on their notice page that they flag harmful and offensive language and descriptions with a content warning using an external lexicon called *Hatebase* (University of Pittsburgh Library System). However, NARA and the University of Pittsburgh encourage users to report harmful language to the respective institution and provide instructions and information on how to contact them.

Content Warnings and Censorship

Garnar and Magi (2015), published with the American Library Association (ALA), define censorship as “A decision made by a governing authority or its representative(s) to suppress, exclude, expurgate, remove, or restrict public access to a library resource based on a person or group’s disapproval of its content or its author/creator” (p. 248). Censorship, therefore, is a deliberate act of information suppression. Many opponents of content warnings argue that content warnings are a form of prejudicial label (Antelman, 2023, p. 462). The ALA describes a prejudicial label as a label created with the intent to restrict access by warning, discouraging, or prohibiting users from accessing content (American Library Association Council, 2015). According to their interpretation, content warnings count as a violation of the third tenet of the Library Bill of Rights, that “libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment” (Magi & Garnar, 2015, p. 15), as well as a violation of the First Amendment of the United States Bill of Rights that guarantees free speech. They further argue that any defense of content warnings is a defense of censorship (Antleman, 2023, p. 462). Antleman emphasizes that archivists and librarians should focus on content and context statements, as opposed to content warnings, and that focus should be on maintaining the role of steward rather than a historian (p. 672).

Rogers argues that the benefits that content warnings give outweigh the risks of being viewed as potential censorship. She states that acknowledging the harmfulness of intolerant images and language can counteract or even alleviate the harm that the users may experience while engaging with the content (2023, p. 10). Additionally, Rogers writes that content warnings can help build community both inside and outside of libraries and archives by working with members of the communities to work out what can be considered harmful to community member users (pp. 10-11).

CONCEPTUALIZING CONTENT WARNINGS AS A FORM OF TRAUMA-INFORMED ARCHIVING

Trauma-Informed Archiving as a Liberatory Practice

Trauma-informed archiving is an archival practice that creates safe environments within archives based on trauma and how it affects people (Laurent & Wright, 2021, p. 40). No one is immune to trauma, including archivists, archival staff, and users of archives. The act of preserving cultural heritage and history also creates and preserves trauma, but that does not mean that archivists, archival staff, and archive users should be forced to face their trauma directly. The purpose of trauma-informed archiving is to recognize and acknowledge the effects of trauma on the traumatized and to circumnavigate re-traumatization.

Laurent and Wright (2021) discuss five principles of trauma-informed practice, each built on the prior one: safety, trust and transparency, choice, collaboration, and empowerment (2021, p. 52). One of the biggest, and often unacknowledged, emotional and mental health risks while working with archival materials, as a user or worker, is caused by vicarious trauma (Mathieson, 2023). Vicarious trauma is defined as, “The emotional residue of exposure to traumatic stories and experiences of others through work” (Policy Research Associates, 2021). In 2022, Laurent and Wright conducted an international survey study of archivists and their experiences in the archives with trauma, resulting in recommendations for the field, including the development of education on these topics through archival education programs. Requiring training for employees and volunteers and promoting educational seminars and lectures around trauma and trauma-informed archiving will help better prepare students, workers, and users for what they may encounter in the archive and give them the skills to handle their own trauma before they encounter someone else’s. Mathieson notes three key findings from Laurent and Wright’s survey (Mathieson, 2023): 87% of the respondents believed that archives can cause trauma, 68% reported that they were exposed to distressing or traumatic content, and 92% reported that they were not taught about trauma or trauma-informed archive practices in their academic education.

However, professional societies are working to bridge the resource gap as the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) and the Society of American Archivists both provide guidelines for dealing with vicarious trauma in archives (Mathieson, 2023). The ASA’s webpage for vicarious trauma and support, while it only provides support hotlines for Australia, does include several techniques and responses for dealing with trauma such as: doing mindfulness and breathing exercises, physically grounding oneself, removing oneself from the environment and taking a break elsewhere, and taking time to process and reflect on what happened (2024). The Society of American Archivists (SAA) discusses resources for archivists working with collections that are related to tragedy or disasters (2019, pp. 1-3). They discuss seeking support from family, friends, community, or healthcare providers and how to seek professional help for free if one does not have insurance. They also provide a list of helplines and resources for grief, trauma, and self-care. In addition to these resources, Mathieson also mentions that a community of practices for trauma-informed archives, called Trauma-Informed Archives Community of Practice, had been established on the social media platform, *Discord*, which hosts quarterly meetings, shares

additional resources, and provides a community for workers in galleries, libraries, archives, museums and other related fields (Trauma-Informed Archives Community of Practice, 2024).

The Role of Content Warnings in Trauma-Informed Archives:

Laurent and Wright suggest that the principle of choice can be implemented through content warnings, which allow users to decide whether or not they wish to proceed to view specific content by notifying them of the potential harm they may experience due to the nature or context of the content first. They may also include resources for dealing with harm or trauma caused by the content. It is critical to note that for a content warning to be an effective component of trauma-informed practice, it must be *visible* and *comprehensive* (Rogers, 2023). Determining what level in an archive a content warning should be placed is imperative for its functionality. The broadest information level in an archive is the archive's repository, then collection, series, box or folder, and finally item and its description. Rogers states that "archives are discovered at the folder level, rather than the descriptive level" (p. 11). Therefore, content warnings should be placed in finding aid information and on the box or folder.

Another aspect that contends with the visibility of content warnings is the attention that they receive from users (p. 11). Because few users will take the time to read a lengthy content warning, short and direct warnings should be presented in attention-grabbing styles like a change in text color, a bold font, and bulleted lists with the harmful content topics listed separately should be used. The component of comprehensiveness may be somewhat more challenging to implement when considering the previous advice; a remedy for this issue is directness. Writing a content warning that is comprehensive yet simple seems contradictory; however, existing templates can be adapted to meet the aforementioned visibility criteria and applied to the folder, box, and finding aid levels (Stanford, 2023).

Though proficient in technical competencies, LIS programs do not always prepare students to understand the *power* in information services. Archivists and archival staff, on account of their position, have power over how users interpret information presented through archival description. Opposition to content warnings frames them as taking away the users' opportunities to come to their own conclusions about the content (Antelman, 2023, p. 478). Yet, this can be remedied by guidelines created by users and archives for what, how, and where content can receive a content warning in accordance with Laurent and Wright's (2021) advocacy from all levels approach to community-based healing from trauma (p. 71). Though this approach to information services represents a shift from past framings of ethical LIS practices as rooted in objective detachment, professional "ethics are fluid, demanding a process of introspection that involves assessing the responsibility of a profession in light of evolving norms and expectations" (Roeschley et al., 2024, p. 404).

The use of content warnings, not as a means of censorship but as a means of implementing trauma-informed archival practices through information, has the potential to increase the trust and safety of all levels of an archive, from the users to the director of archives. Safety extends beyond just physical, but into mental and emotional well-being, and that well-being should receive just as much consideration as all other aspects of an archive receive.

However, content warnings can only move from individualized efforts to field-wide standardized practices if and when LIS education programs make trauma-informed archiving a competency that is just as important to teach as any technical aspect of arranging and describing collections.

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