

OP-ED

Too quick on 'triggers'

JONAH GOLDBERG

TRIGGER WARNING: I am going to make fun of "trigger warnings." Of course, if you're the sort of person who takes trigger warnings very seriously, you probably don't read this column too often. So maybe my mockery will miss its target, sort of like making fun of the Amish on the Internet — it's not like they'll find out.

In fairness, the Amish are actually very impressive people. Even though some Amish communities are more tolerant of technology than the stereotypes suggest, their Anabaptist puritanical streak leaves me cold. On the whole, I like modernity. I may not love every new fad of the last few centuries, but mark me down as a fan of refrigeration, Netflix, modern dentistry, universal suffrage, the internal combustion engine and all that stuff.

Here's another thing about the Amish. They don't expect everyone else to pussyfoot around them.

You can't say the same thing about the trigger unhappy folks making headway on college campuses. Before I continue, I should explain what a trigger warning is.

They started on left-wing and feminist websites. Like a "spoiler alert" in a movie review or a more specific version of the movie rating system, trigger warnings are intended to alert very sensitive people that some content might set off, or trigger, their post-traumatic stress disorder or simply deeply offend some people. According to most accounts, this was a conscientious accommodation of people who'd been raped or otherwise horribly abused.

But soon the practice metastasized. Trigger warnings were provided for an ever-increasing, and ridiculous, list of "triggers." For example, one website offers a trigger warning that it contains images of small holes, lest it terrify people suffering from trypophobia, which is — you guessed it — a fear of clusters of small holes. Another website warns visitors that it will not tolerate any debate over the validity of its trigger warnings for, among many other things, trypophobia, pictures from high places, audio of snapping fingers or images or discussion of spiders, food, escalators or animals in wigs.

Now, the Internet is a very big place, and there's nothing wrong with obscure websites catering to the boutique anxieties of troubled people.

But now the cancer has spread to the college campus. At UC Santa Barbara, the student government has formally requested that professors provide trigger warnings on their syllabuses. The idea was initially suggested by a student who had been the victim of sexual abuse. Her class was shown a film that depicted a rape, and while she herself was not "triggered" by it, she felt she should have been warned.

I have no problem with expecting professors to warn students that some material may be graphic or upsetting, and my hunch is that most professors do that already.

But as is so often the case, common sense is barely a speed bump for the steamroller of political correctness. Oberlin College's Office of Equity Concerns advised professors to avoid such triggering subjects as racism, colonialism and sexism. They soon rescinded it, perhaps because they realized that if such subjects become taboo, much of their faculty would be left with nothing to talk about.

The New York Times reports that activists want many classics to have trigger warnings in effect printed on them like health advisories on cigarette packages. "The Merchant of Venice," for instance, would need the label "contains anti-Semitism." Virginia Woolf's "Mrs. Dalloway" would need a warning that it discusses suicide. Oberlin's memo advised faculty that Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart," may "trigger readers who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide and more."

As a victim of "and more," I can sympathize. But this way leads to madness.

And what a strange madness it is. We live in a culture in which it is considered bigotry to question whether women should join combat units — but it is also apparently outrageous to subject women of the same age to realistic books and films about war without a warning? Even questioning the ubiquity of degrading porn, never mind labeling music or video games, is denounced as Comstockery, but labeling "The Iliad" makes sense?

I do wish these people would make up their mind. Alas, that's hard to do when you've lost it.

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Oil and rail — a dangerous mix

More trains carrying more crude mean more potential disasters.

By Jayni Foley Hein

THE FIERY derailment in Virginia recently of a train transporting oil was the latest in a series of alarming accidents involving oil transport in North America in the last year. In 2013, more oil spilled from U.S. trains than in the previous four decades combined — and that doesn't include a Canadian spill that incinerated the downtown core of Lac-Mégantic in Quebec last year, killing 47.

We can expect such serious accidents to continue if immediate changes are not made. Nationally, the transport of oil by rail is on a steep upward trajectory, largely due to fracking in North Dakota and to drilling in Canada's Alberta tar sands. And much of the oil being transported is especially dangerous, containing high levels of extremely volatile and combustible vapors. In recent testimony before Congress, the rail industry made clear that many of the cars carrying this type of crude are not equipped to do so safely.

California is in the cross hairs of this dangerous situation. The

state is projected to receive up to 150 million barrels of oil by rail by 2016, compared with just 2 million barrels in 2011, and much of that oil will be volatile crude from the Bakken region of North Dakota and Canada.

According to the California Energy Almanac, the state's refineries unloaded 1.41 million barrels of oil imported by rail in the first quarter of this year, twice as much as in the same period during 2013. Already the third-largest oil refining state, California faces six potential new rail offloading terminals, as well as refinery expansion to accommodate the increase in North American oil production.

North Dakota's Mineral Resources Department estimates that as much as 90% of that state's crude is expected to move by rail this year, much of it to California's refineries and ports in the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles and the Central Valley. The freight routes pass through populous parts of cities including Richmond, Oakland and Berkeley in the north and Los Angeles and Long Beach in the south.

The federal Department of Transportation has ordered railroads to alert state officials about large shipments of Bakken crude moving through their states. It also has urged railroads to use their strongest rail cars for carrying the volatile oil.

But more is needed. Many local governments and citizens feel

powerless to prevent these trains from moving through their towns. While some cities, such as Berkeley and Richmond, have passed resolutions intended to protect residents from crude being transported by rail, the ability of states and cities to directly regulate rail transportation is limited by federal law, which trumps conflicting or overlapping state and local rail regulations. States and cities have no authority over routing or rail car design, for example.

The Department of Transportation is working on more stringent regulations for rail car design, but it should also consider other rules and policies, including rerouting oil trains to avoid population centers, sources of drinking water and fragile ecosystems.

California also has a role to play. The state should begin taxing all oil imports, delivered by any mode of transportation, and use the revenue to support emergency response equipment and training at the state and local levels, particularly in areas most affected by rail traffic. The state should establish a system to convey this new railroad shipment information to local emergency personnel.

The state should also call on the California Public Utilities Commission to identify areas of railroad track that qualify as "essentially local safety hazards," a narrow exception to the preemption provisions of the Federal Rail Safety Act that allows for more

stringent state regulation in areas with unique, high-risk characteristics.

The state should also clarify the responsibilities of multiple agencies involved in safety and environmental oversight, including the Public Utilities Commission, the Governor's Office of Emergency Services, the California Environmental Protection Agency and the Office of Spill Prevention and Response.

Local government and permitting agencies in the state should also consider denying land-use and other permits for refineries and offloading facilities if they find safety risks or improper environmental mitigation under statutes like the California Environmental Quality Act.

And community members should become involved, commenting in environmental review processes for proposed refinery and terminal expansions and supporting the ultimate remedy: reducing reliance on fossil fuels by promoting renewable energy, energy efficiency and smart growth.

The increase in oil transported by rail is a symptom of our ongoing dependence on oil; we need to make changes that both enhance short-term safety and pave the way for a clean energy future.

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Follow Compton's lead on truancy

Proposed legislation in Sacramento would expand successful reform efforts statewide.

By Aja Brown

How to improve California's education system is a challenge that has long divided state and local elected officials, education advocates, teachers and parents. One thing is certain, however: No solution to our schools' problems will make an ounce of difference if students are out on the street or at home when they should be in class. Any attempt to turn around our troubled public school system must address the truancy problem.

Atty. Gen. Kamala Harris brought truancy into clear focus in 2013 with a report that found that about 1 million California elementary school students were truant in the 2012-13 school year. In Los Angeles County, 166,469 elementary school students were truant; that's more than 20% of those enrolled. Put another way, on any given day, 1 in 5 K-6 students are missing out on an education guaranteed by the state Constitution.

You might ask, what's significant about a few missed days of school to a third-grader? But the long-term ramifications are very serious. Children who are truant in elementary school are far less likely to graduate from high school, and by extension, more likely to end up unemployed and committing crimes. Indeed, state

data show that 75% of California's prison inmates are high school dropouts.

In addition, truancy has tremendous economic implications for our communities. School funding is directly tied to attendance rates, which means that California's schools are leaving dollars on the table — according to Harris' report, \$1.4 billion to be exact. The indirect costs to our communities are even greater. The price tag of truancy in terms of lost productivity, lost taxes and in criminal justice spending is estimated at \$46 billion annually.

Last year, Compton addressed its truancy crisis, with impressive results. The Compton Unified School District achieved a 1.47% increase in daily attendance. That may seem like a small increase, but that jump translated to an additional 57,326 days in school for Compton's students and an increase of \$2 million in state funding for the district.

The effort began in 2011, with a new strategy to improve communication about attendance between teachers and parents. School staff reached out to families with truancy notifications and parent conferences. A key component was detecting truancy patterns early on. The district's new Web-based attendance system, which allows for real-time monitoring of truancy, made this possible.

If these measures can work in Compton, they can work in other California cities. It's going to take a concerted effort from legislators, school administrators, teachers, parents and local law enforcement. That's why the pack-

age of truancy bills in the state Senate and the Assembly is a smart, and necessary, investment in our schools.

These bills would strengthen efforts by Compton's and other school districts to come up with effective local solutions to truancy and chronic absenteeism. They would also help schools across the state meet the requirements of the governor's Local Control Funding Formula, which requires schools to track attendance and chronic absence.

AB 1866 would fund the modernization of the state's absenteeism tracking system, allowing all local school districts to do what Compton did: accurately track attendance and build early warning systems to identify and assist at-risk children. And as a statewide system, it would also allow for efficient access to students' attendance history as they move from district to district.

AB 1643 would require each county to create a school attendance review board. In Compton, we've been helped by the collaboration of administrators, educators, parents and other parties addressing truancy through the use of community as well as school resources. These review boards would institutionalize that effort and support wraparound services for parents struggling to keep their children in school.

And there are two "reporting" bills. AB 1672 would require the review boards to complete annual reports, which would help Compton and other districts identify best practices for truancy reduction. SB 1007 would require the attorney general and the state De-

partment of Education to issue an annual report so that what is happening at the local level can be assessed year over year.

Finally, AB 2141 would require that district attorneys communicate with school districts on the outcome of extreme cases: the "truancy referrals" that review boards make to law enforcement. This bill would guarantee baseline information sharing and help school officials determine what strategies are most effective at improving attendance.

Truancy is not the only issue facing California's schools, but it's an important one. And if Compton is any indication, we can do better. These bills aren't about measuring student or teacher performance. They're not about punishing parents or schools. They are about giving educators real, practical tools to get and keep our children in class. They are a critical investment in California's public safety and economic well-being. Most important, they help fulfill the promise made to every child in California's Constitution: the right to an education.

AJA BROWN is the mayor of Compton.

FOR THE RECORD

Campus assaults: A May 15 Op-Ed article regarding sexual assault policies said Yale University is among the 55 universities being investigated for their handling of sexual misconduct allegations. It is not.