

Trustpassing

Andrea Zeffiro

Abstract

Trustpassing is a series of four zines that share collective stories from Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, about how digital vulnerabilities intersect with material forms of security and safety, including but not limited to emergency housing, sex workers' rights, job security, policing and law enforcement, and access to safe spaces. The zines stem from a community-centred project in partnership with Jelena Vermilion, Executive Director of the Sex Workers' Action Program (SWAP), Hamilton. Employing a zine as participatory action research methodology (French and Curd 2021; Kindon et al. 2007), the project documented and mobilized expertise drawn from lived experience, positioning participants as knowledge holders (Cornish et al. 2023; Lovata, 2008) whose insights challenge dominant assumptions about what digital safety looks like and who is considered at risk.

Mainstream digital security frameworks treat end users generically. We all face common vulnerabilities. By practising good 'cyber hygiene', we strengthen our first line of defence and protect ourselves. In this approach, cyber risks and threats are often seen as individual choices, shifting responsibility onto end users (Basu & Biddolph 2025). This project steps back from treating digital security as a universal resource that benefits everyone equally, aiming to examine the digital insecurities and threats that are often overlooked by mainstream frameworks (Bengtsson Meuller, 2023; Chen et al. 2022; Cristiano et al. 2023; Gajjala et al. 2026).

How do digital security frameworks identify end users who already face social stigma? What are the varied impacts of digital safety and security? How are digital (in)securities connected to the experience of material security and access to basic necessities? How do people who rely on social services, lack stable housing, and engage in street-based sex work come to be disproportionately subjected to invasive and unwarranted surveillance that is routinely justified as 'protection' or 'security'? More broadly, this project asks whether reorganizing our understanding of digital security to include the social dimensions of insecurities and vulnerabilities alongside the technical ones can help shift where accountability is placed.

From January to May 2025, we hosted 11 workshops on Thursday evenings at the YWCA in downtown Hamilton, drawing roughly 220 participants. The first 7 sessions focused on creative practices such as collaging and blackout poetry, each guided by a set of prompts. The final 4 workshops shifted to reviewing rough zine drafts and gathering participant feedback to inform the final design. Across the 7 content generation workshops, the prompts moved from broad questions about safety and security to more specific reflections on participants' experiences in digital environments. Rather than impose fixed definitions of digital safety, security, or harm, we intentionally kept these concepts open. Our goal was to understand how participants themselves experience, articulate, and interpret these concepts. Although we developed a plan for each

workshop, we approached the workshops iteratively. We prioritized keeping our data generation methods responsive to participants' needs and engagement (Benjamin-Thomas et al. 2018). As a result, we returned to collaging multiple times because it proved to be the most accessible, comfortable, and generative method for our participant community.

Across the four-volume series, the zines bring together safety and security strategies, calls to action, shared experiences, anecdotes, and striking visuals, some of which were remixed during the design process. Because all content was generated directly through the workshops, the material reflects participants' own language, insights, and priorities. While the volumes are interconnected, each can also be read on its own, a structure that supports ease of reproducibility. Together, the volumes capture distinct ways that safety and security manifest in participants' lives, with each subtitle drawn from statements and observations shared by participants.

Volume 1, Technology Gives You Freedom, moves from the emancipatory potential of technology to the vulnerabilities and harms participants encounter online and offline, establishing the relationship between material and digital forms of security and safety. *Volume 2, Insecurity Is Good Business*, examines how insecurity is built into technological infrastructures, from social media platforms to law enforcement systems, and how people are secured in uneven and inequitable ways. *Volume 3, We All Feel Secure Until We Are Not*, builds on this analysis by exploring the business model of insecurity that underpins the internet, while also highlighting the 'differential vulnerabilities' (Pierce et al. 2018) participants face, including reflections on the City of Hamilton ransomware attack (Beattie 2024) and the prioritization of technological development over core forms of social security such as housing, income, food access, mental health supports, and childcare. *Volume 4, Digital Safety Doesn't Mean You're Safe*, turns toward mitigation strategies used by street-based sex workers and expands into broader questions about what constitutes safety and security, emphasizing that these concepts are not universal. It surfaces key insights into potential forms of (digital) safety that could make street-based work safer, offering an open-ended proposition about what becomes prioritized and what is overlooked when we talk about safety and security.

The zine format was indispensable to the project. First and foremost, we needed a form that could cohere individual experiences into a collective narrative while accommodating multiple modes of expression, including visual and textual content. We also needed a form that could be disseminated quickly, easily reproduced and shared, and that could carry community knowledge outward (Baker and Cantillon 2022; Lovata 2018). The zine form offered all of this while also challenging traditional academic conventions about who produces knowledge and whose expertise counts (Vong 2016). We wanted the immediate public output to be something participants could recognize themselves in, take ownership of, and be proud of. A core aim of *Trustpassing* is to function for its readers as "engines of critical engagement, self-questioning, and renewal" (Joseph and Sawyer 2023, 13) by foregrounding participant knowledge and expertise, inviting critical reflection, and opening space for alternative ways of understanding digital safety, security, and power.

Print, Assembly and Sharing Instructions

Please share digital copies of the zine.

Print as a booklet on 8.5 x 11 paper. Set print settings to print on both sides and print on the short edge.

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