

Melissa Ocepek and Brenna Ellison Interview

Melissa Ocepek, Assistant Professor in the School of Information Science, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

Brenna Ellison, Associate Professor in Agricultural Economics, Purdue University.

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SPEAKERS

Melissa Ocepek, Jessie Knoles, Brenna Ellison, Inbar Michael

Inbar Michael 00:01

Okay, great. Um, so my name is Inbar Michael and I am a graduate student representing the University of Illinois Archives. Today's date is November 30, 2022. And we are here meeting via Zoom to discuss the research that Dr. Ocepek and Dr. Ellison conducted throughout the pandemic on US household food acquisition behaviors. for inclusion in the University of Illinois COVID-19 documentation project. I'll let my interviewees introduce themselves. Could you state your name, professional title and the department that you worked for?

Brenna Ellison 00:38

Hi, I'm Dr. Brenna Ellison. I am an Associate Professor in Agricultural Economics at Purdue University. And previously, I was an Associate Professor in the Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics at the University of Illinois.

Melissa Ocepek 00:54

I am Melissa Ocepek, I am an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois.

Inbar Michael 01:01

Thank you both. All right. So we're gonna start with a couple of warm up questions and lead up to factual research questions. Just like curious about a couple of things more broad. Do you remember the first time that you heard about the emergence of COVID-19? And then to some questions you can also think about are what were your initial thoughts? And then how did your departments respond? So a big question, so. Okay,

Melissa Ocepek 01:35

So I am an avid Twitter reader. And so I remember in January of 2020, falling asleep reading tweets about what was happening in China. And thinking, Oh, this seems awful. I'm glad it's not here. And just being like, is this an apocalypse [inaudible]? Literal [doom] scrolling, as I would fall asleep, which I was like, this is a weird way to fall asleep. But um, and then it, I remember, I think it was March 14 or 13. It was a Wednesday, and we had a faculty meeting. It was the last in person event the iSchool had. And it

was snowing. And I think the night before Tom Hanks got COVID. And during the meeting, they canceled the NCAA tournament. And we were just like, we were passing a microphone around. And we were like, maybe we shouldn't do this. And that was like the first moment of like, real level of okay. And then the next day, I think they I think officially classes went the rest of the week. But we I taught that the next day. And my co-instructor and I both decided to just move to zoom. And I wasn't back on campus for many, many months.

Brenna Ellison 02:52

Yeah, I don't think my experience was all that different. I remember reading about it, early in January 2, and selfishly, we were planning to go to Florida on vacation, and I was like, I hope this doesn't impact our chance at a vacation. And then as it starts moving to the US and in March, again, my concern was just, you know, really, how are we going to manage childcare? So that was something that was a really big deal in our household? And how are we going to balance that with work obligations? And I personally don't remember a lot at the department level, the college, you know, was trying to be really forthcoming with communications, I think, maybe my department might have been a little different just kind of hoping it would go right. Like it wouldn't be as big as it seemed to be. And so we have been more reactive than, than maybe most this group in the iSchool,

Melissa Ocepek 03:50

I will say too, taking our course online wasn't a big deal. Because in the iSchool not to, but like we've been doing online education for 20 years. And I had previously taught multiple course, oh, yeah, I think I previously taught multiple courses online. So we kind of had the infrastructure right away. So like, literally the Wednesday they were like, Oh, we're thinking about shutting down like things are getting really scary. And then like, they still let that week happen. But like, I don't remember there being any pushback from any students or anything that hey, we're going to do class on Zoom, because we would have guest speakers on Zoom. And it wasn't it wasn't uncommon to do online classes. So that that did make that part of it at least quite easy. I do not remember what I did in terms of childcare that first week. I don't remember when daycare closed I don't remember when she stopped going but that eventually became a concern. But yeah, I that part I blocked out.

Inbar Michael 04:51

Actually I didn't write this down but it got me thinking so for Dr. Ellison cause Dr. Ocepek talked about this a little bit. Were you teaching any classes and then what was like that for you? If I since I know, in the iSchool, we do have like the online degree. So there is more things set in place for that. But I don't know that that's the case for every department.

Brenna Ellison 05:13

Right. So in my department, I really think we only have like one class that was offered online in the summer, otherwise, we had no classes offered online. And so it was not something that I would say, people were ready for in general. I think some people were more willing to experiment. But I just recall hearing from students. For me, I usually did live lectures to the extent that I could. And I remember students telling me so many professors, like in the college, and within our department, were just posting slides. And it was like, teach it to yourself sort of thing. And it was just not a great student experience. And so I personally felt bad doing that, I chose to, to at least do live lectures, but it was definitely hard.

But I do think I've adapted to where like, I don't mind it, if I have to have that as a flex option. Now when I'm teaching like I'm not as intimidated by it as I was initially.

Inbar Michael 06:23

Okay, so that is kind of curious to see how different departments within the same school adapted, especially when they had different infrastructures set in place for online school. So I also recall my experiences of that very clearly in my undergrad. And then you also both mentioned childcare? I don't know [I know]. Dr. Ocepek you mentioned you don't maybe recall so much. But I'm just curious what that was like for both of you during the pandemic. Yeah, especially I guess, even if you don't remember from like, the get go, I guess throughout what was that like for you, especially like working at the same time.

Brenna Ellison 07:13

I remember. I remember very vividly, it was funny. I knew I had the interview today, and I was talking to my husband this morning. And I was like, my youngest child now is about the age that my oldest child was when this like, went down. And I was like, Oh my gosh. And I mean, out of our two jobs, mine was the flexible one. And so it was my job to do the childcare. So, at the time, my son was about 16 months old and really liked walking, we walked blocks and blocks around our neighborhood every day, like I bet we walked four or five miles a day, we watched a lot of Sesame Street. I mean, anything to just survive the day we ate a lot of chicken nuggets. And honestly, once things kind of opened back up for sanity, I would take him to Blaine's Farm and Fleet because they had ducks and he could see the ducks and the chicks. And that is what we did. And so I very vividly remember this time, both fondly and like please let this never happen again.

Melissa Ocepek 08:24

So my kid when it [started] was 18 months, so Brenna and I have kids very close in age. And I just remember sitting on the floor in my basement I didn't even- so I'm in my home office. Now I didn't have this. Like this was in a guest room. My desk was just in the basement because it like I like being at school I'd like [pick] my office, I had a desk which was nice. But um and that the basement was meant to be like a shared space and it just turned into a major playroom because it would just be I would be on the floor with her trying to get her to do anything by herself which she rejected with my laptop trying to do emails or whatever and my partner and I my partner is a professor as well. So we just did two hour shifts of okay I'm gonna work for this two hours you watch the kid you're- and then swap and then swap and then swap and because at that age, I mean it's so nice [that your kid wanted to walk] my kid just wanted to be with us the whole time and wanted us to play and do whatever, pretend dress up a lot of Cocomelon I remember and like you could get maybe like 30 minutes like if you put cocoa mana and she was in the right mood where you could actually like type but I and then during class time it was that was like protected type but otherwise, it was just like, try to find a minute here a minute there. And I'm actually some of my colleagues started a Slack channel several of us that all were assistant professors and mostly with small kids, and we were all just sharing like, what are you doing? Like, where can you take them? What park is open? I mean, the parks were closed at the beginning. So can you and it was March. So it was cold at first and then it warmed up. Thank goodness. And yeah, it was just like, where's a safe place to take your kid for anything? We also, I mean, you said you went to a Fleet Farm or farm fleet, we would just get in the car and drive around just to get out of the house. I didn't go

anywhere. Like how far can we drive before we see another house was [inaudible]? Yeah. And I don't think I got childcare back, I think until June, I want to say is June. Yeah. And I should say Brenna and I our kids at that time were in the same daycare, too. So our daycare closed in March and was closed until June. So that was a lot of parenting time. Wonderful. Bonding, but also Oh, my God, what is happening? I just remember thinking this is a global of like, never in recorded history of all the daycares been closed? All like what's the game? Because before in 1980, there really weren't daycares. Right? Women didn't work. And or not at scale. And now they do. And like I had this vision of what my life would be like having children and working with sorry, I'm going off on a tangent I feel very strongly about this, and that Vision just disappeared. And like, it felt like three days.

Inbar Michael 11:26

Yeah, no, thank you both for sharing. I just reminds me, like, of one of my professors that I would meet with on Zoom, and I would just see like a small curly head of hair just like occasionally pop up next to him. It was really cute. So yeah, I can imagine it's very, it's a quite a change, or like a shift from kind of keeping the two separate. Oh, yeah.

Melissa Ocepek 11:56

If I may just, I was at a dissertation defense. I was on a dissertation committee. This like, I can't remember if it was a proposal or full defense. But this is like very important for the student. And I'm trying to be as cognizant and aware as possible. And my kid was sick. And my sister was here trying to help. And I was literally on zoom with the like blur and I was holding a crying toddler asking my questions. I just think what is life right now, like, you know, doing my best to still be a present person in this because I cared about the student, I cared about this work. It was really interesting. But like with a crying toddler in my arms, while helping the student with their dissertation. So that's the pandemic, but that's what it was. It was that.

Inbar Michael 12:45

[Inaudible] from life. But it's not so financed. But it's, I guess, people found a way to make it work. But yeah. Thank you both for sharing, and for indulging me with your stories. So a little more about research, we were kind of curious if you were working on a thing. And then if you had to kind of like change your plans or like halt that research, did you get back to it, or never just the pandemic change everything about that.

Brenna Ellison 13:22

For me, a lot of the work that I do is online survey base. So it didn't have to stop in that sense. But like, having no childcare for three months meant just like my productivity, just, you know, it, it went nonexistent. I do have some other projects, though. I have a grant where we were working in school lunch rooms, and that project has been derailed ever since honestly, because we couldn't get in schools for so long. And now COVID supply chain issues are still ultimately impacting food that's available. So to actually use school lunchroom experiments like it's, it's still derailed, we've never been able to get that particular project back on track. And the other thing that I remember is, at the time, we had a small equipment grant to start using eye tracking equipment, and we were really excited about it. And then COVID hit and we were not allowed to come on campus to even do the training. And then the lag and able to bring in human subjects like in a lab was so long. Basically, I think we have the

technology, we've still never done training. It's not being used. And so like those research avenues kind of dried up as well, unfortunately.

Melissa Ocepek 14:32

Yeah, and before the pandemic, most of my work, I've done a few surveys but was largely ethnographic and so that involves interviews and quite detailed observations. Actually, that's why knowing Brenna and creating the work that we will talk about in a few minutes here was so valuable for me because I needed to switch gears quite quickly. And so in the summer of 2019, I started what was supposed to be a two year project, where I did an ethnographic study of the goal, I think was eight individuals. And I had done four, I did a pilot and then three that summer, where I looked, I basically followed them around for a week of their life, anywhere spending two to eight hours a day with them, recording what they did, to really what I was trying to study is how people's everyday information behaviors change, or do not change in different contexts. So what do you like at work? What do you like at home? What are you like, in your hobbies? What are you like, with your kids? What do you like with your partner? What do you like with by yourself, and that project has not been able to be to continue. I probably, well, I might have been able to start it last summer. But quite honestly, because it took so long for human subjects research to even be possible again, and my research has changed so wildly. And the demands of a tenure clock have made me at least feel as if getting things out is more important than returning to that I hope to return to it someday. Because I still think it's interesting. And I actually the thing, one of the things I really like about ethnographic work is usually the shelf life of the data is longer. So it won't be strange if I return to it in five years. And of course, I'll say that I'll say these were done in 2019. And these were done in, you know, 2024 or whatever. But and I think in a lot of ways that will create an interesting comparison. But that was not the goal of the research. Right? I the reason I was waiting for the second summer is because the research was so time intensive. I couldn't do it while teaching. So I could only do it in the summer. And finding- like it just I mean, it basically each interaction took a month of my life away. But because it's finding them setting up the times doing the pre-interview, doing the post-interview, you know, but it's research I love doing but I have not done any observations since the pandemic. I have done interviews, but all on Zoom. I haven't interviewed anybody in person since the pandemic, I don't think or more phone.

Inbar Michael 17:10

Okay, kind of speaking to research and then leading into like the specific work that you've done. How did your research collaboration for like, did you know each other's research or your work? Or like, Have you ever done anything together? Before?

Melissa Ocepek 17:27

Yeah, so I heard about Brenna, because I was at a DPI the-

Brenna Ellison 17:35

Discovery Partners [Institute].

Melissa Ocepek 17:36

There we go. I'm terrible [inaudible], the BPI meeting about food. And I was like, Oh, I study food and information. And some of those do you know Brenna Ellison, she studies food and information. I was

like, No, but I should. And so I reached out to her, this is probably 2018. And we got coffee. And we just were like, Oh, it's you know, maybe someday we'll do something together. And we'd run into each other at daycare. And I think pretty quickly after things shut down. We were both like drowning, while also being like, Oh, you shouldn't be studying this. Like everyone, I don't know about Brenna's life, everyone in my life was like- cause I had kind of moved away from grocery shopping. I was looking at other things. I was working on a housing book at the time. But everyone was like, Oh, how do you think COVID affecting groceries, I was getting press requests for the first time about my work. And so it was really clear that a grocery shopping was just chaos. It was oftentimes people only place that they left their house for. And so I was like, Brenna is the perfect person to work with on a project like this. And I think we we started meeting pretty quickly. That's my recollection.

Brenna Ellison 18:43

Yeah, it was funny, though. Because the childcare strain, we almost I think, abandoned the project, because we're like, we're already gonna miss the boat, this pandemics gonna be over like we are too late to the game, which is hilarious now. But you know, like, I had been on some other projects with people that they started collecting data, like in March immediately like these things. So Melissa, and I were like, we might have missed our chance, like, I don't know. And then, you know, as it progressed in the summer, like, maybe it's still worth doing, we can, you know, because even research now is still being published since like, we did this in April 2020. And so, still a lot of people relying on those first few months. And the reality is like, that's a really crazy period to observe. But people do adapt, they start doing things and so that that's kind of at least how we came to this. And we were like, we can live with this. Like, actually, this is an interesting contribution to and so yeah, we had really good intentions to start early. But I think due to these kind of just like mental and childcare constraints ended up a little lagged but I think honestly was pretty beneficial for us in the long run.

Melissa Ocepek 19:50

Yeah, I completely agree. I look at it now. I remember just meeting like once a week just to like keep the project alive. I feel like with both of us holding our children at some point on Zoom. Being like, okay, thinking that we'd missed the boat, but then realizing maybe we hadn't. And then once childcare came back in June being like, Okay, let's see how fast we could get this survey up writing novel questions. You know, most of most of the work I do in terms of interviews, I always read all my questions. Brenna does a combination of pulling scales. And so it's like, well, what can we reuse? That even makes sense anymore? And then, honestly, the hardest part, I think, when we first wrote, our first survey was just what? There's so many things we want to know about. How do we like we kept- we started with this massive topic list and questions and just kept pruning it to what we hope to be a 15 minute survey to make it kind of realistic for people to take while also thinking you know, we want to study the signs, and are people following them? How much? Kind of questions like you're asking us today? Like, how much are people paying attention to the pandemic? Are they wearing masks? Are they going out? Are they doing online shopping? Are they shopping at different times? Are they shopping at different frequencies, you know, all of these different things that we were just experiencing as people living in the world too, right? We went to the grocery store, and we thought about how different it was, and how our previous research influenced that, but also how our lived experience influenced that.

Brenna Ellison 21:11

And like, I would also say restaurants, like I just remember, like hearing people go to restaurants, and I was like, How dare you? Right? Like, there's all these things like, or if we went, I was like, Oh, my God, someone's gonna judge us so much. So it was just, you know, not only grocery shopping, but also this restaurant behavior and like, what are people doing? How are they getting food like? Because for me, grocery shopping was like, a chance to get out of the house during the crazy and is like, Oh, thank goodness, we can do this, because we can't do anything else. And so yeah, I think grocery shopping was a big factor. But we also had this like, there's so much like weird shame about different activities during COVID. And I feel like restaurants was one of those where you're either giving it or getting it sort of thing.

Melissa Ocepek 21:51

Yeah. And you know, I'm actually right now working on a new project on misinformation. And I'm looking into ghost kitchens, which was like a big topic of restaurant stuff at the beginning of COVID. Because they're all these ghost kitchens pretending to be like fine dining restaurants that weren't doing takeout. And I remember my own family, we had like, we created a practice of like, Friday takeout because we wanted to support local business. And that was like a big thing to try to like, keep the restaurants you loved in business, because we were all I mean, I know I, as a foodie, I was terrified that, you know, we don't have that many great restaurants in Champaign, we have more now, amazingly. But how do we keep them alive? How do we how do we not just eat chicken nuggets every day? Right? Like, these are all very real concerns. And so I mean, that's something I love so much about studying food is you really can use your own life as such a kind of a jumping off point, and then you talk to friends. Like I remember when we were writing our survey, just asking everybody I knew about their grocery shopping to try to pull all the different ways people were getting food, so that we could put them on our survey. One of the cool things we do in the survey is we kind of walk people through a grocery trip. And so we have to like have them go through different directions of oh, so did you do this online? Or did you do this in store? Okay, so if you did it in store, these are the way we're going to ask you and if you do it online, here's what we're going to ask you because each one has seven different options, right? Like, are you doing an online pickup? Are you doing a delivery? Are you doing a curbside? Are you know, how do you feel about the substitutions which is I did one online order and then never again.

Inbar Michael 23:26

Oh, yeah, just a clarifying question. I am not familiar with the term, what is a ghost kitchen?

Melissa Ocepek 23:32

Oh, a ghost kitchen is a restaurant that doesn't have a restaurant. So oftentimes. So they became very popular in the pandemic, although they did exist prior and they exist still. It's um there are different types. Some are run out of people's houses, some are run out of commercial kitchen. So some are actually considered illegal because oftentimes in most states have laws about selling food to people. But basically, it's just a restaurant that is just a kitchen that then food comes out.

Inbar Michael 24:05

Okay. So there's no like seating, right?

Melissa Ocepek 24:09

No seating. Sometimes no address, like, that's the thing. And that's where the misinformation piece comes in is some are totally legitimate businesses, I want to say that, but kind of the ghost kitchen, nature of it. And during the pandemic, there were all these reports that basically people would pop up on Yelp or pop up on GrubHub as like this restaurant selling this food and they were not that restaurant, and they were not selling and they were selling food, but not food from that restaurant. Right? So it created a lot of confusion about where the food was coming from. But like I also remember there was a Thai restaurant that I don't know if it still exists or not here in Champaign that seem to be a ghost kitchen in that you just went to a website and you ordered the food and it came your house but like there was no address there was no rest. There was no no storefront I guess is the word. But the food was good.

Inbar Michael 24:58

That's- I never heard of that. That's, that's interesting. I mean, I'm not I guess I'm not one to really eat at restaurants too often. But okay, um, I guess you kind of summarized already, what your research on household food acquisition behaviors were. But was there anything you wanted to add to what you've already stated?

Brenna Ellison 25:20

I don't wanna steal your thunder on future questions. So I think I think we like covered the big picture of what we were trying to accomplish. Like, really, we just want to understand have changes that people made? Like, are they going to be permanent? Like, are they going to persist? Because I mean, I don't know for decades, people have been saying online shopping is going to overtake brick and mortar. And so if ever it was going to happen, this was the time it was going to happen. And like, our research shows like that, that's not the case, actually. And it's still not the case, I've re, like resumed actually collecting this data in a new survey to keep kind of the documentation going, and it's just not gonna go away. And so that's really interesting, because Melissa and I both talked about that extensively. Like, this is what people have been saying and saying and saying, and so anyways, that was just kind of an interesting aspect.

Melissa Ocepek 26:12

There was just an article in The Atlantic, I want to say about this, I should have sent it to you, Brenna. Brenna and I haven't talked recently, things have been too busy. But about kind of how Webvan is happening again, where all these VCs in Silicon Valley, venture capitalists, are funding all of these like grocery apps, one of them was called, oh, it was something like Huff or smoke, like it started as a weed, snack delivery. But now it's a grocery delivery. But then that doesn't work. But weed and snacks does work, because small scale actually is profitable. But large scale isn't. And it all goes back to the same fundamental principles of how people acquire food, which is most people not everyone, most people want to see it, they want to touch it, they want to smell it, they want to experience it, they want to and this is the big Information Science piece for me, they want to make decisions while evaluating the options. And that's at this point, still much easier to do in a grocery store than it is to online. Right? Because even if you go to like, if you go to like an online grocery website, and you type in mustard, and it shows you all the mustard, it's not as easy as seeing it all kind of next to each other. And going back,

you know, I know that both of you are information scientists. It's like browsing the stacks versus browsing an online catalog. They're just very different systems. And at this point, people are used to going to the store and looking at all the muster looking at all the breads, squeezing it, smelling it, seeing what's popular, what's sold out what isn't. And that actually comes to another topic we looked at, which is like the crisis buying what's that called? I feel like there's a word-

Brenna Ellison 27:52

Stockpiling.

Melissa Ocepek 27:53

Stockpiling. Thank you. That was happening at the being of the pandemic and how that affected people's grocery shopping. And like, why I still have 20 packages yeast. I discovered last week was like, I guess we're baking a lot of bread right now because its about to go bad.

Inbar Michael 28:07

I have a LibGuide that I made for my reference class if you want to use it to bake some bread. Okay, yeah, What was gonna say I had a question. Um, hold on one second. I was I was thinking about something-

Melissa Ocepek 28:26

I go off on a lot of tangents both Inbar and Jessie have been students of mine, so they know this.

Inbar Michael 28:35

Sorry. Okay. I will ask the next question. While I recall my other one, just because it was a good question. And now I'm sad I didn't write it down. So what about, like, what brought you to this point of this particular topic of households food acquisition? Like, how did you come up with the idea itself? Because I know, you probably deliberated and discuss what you wanted to do.

Brenna Ellison 29:00

So I- Melissa will correct me if I'm remembering incorrectly. I think a lot of early people. In the COVID research, were really interested in stockpiling. And they were asking about very specific products and categories, and about purchases. And in my experience, people are really bad at remembering like that level of detail of their behavior. And so I didn't find that to be terribly reliable. And so when Melissa and I talked, I was like, we could try to do purchases, we could try to guess like how people guess how many dollars they're spending. And I was like, but I don't think it's a useful exercise. But I do think that people can remember whether or not they actually went to the grocery store in the last two weeks or whether or not they like order takeout, those sorts of things. And even though we don't know expenditures, and we don't know what they bought, like we still have an overall idea about kind of their risk preferences, the activities there willing to engage and the ones they aren't. And those are still useful indicators, like the overall health of like kind of the food offerings, the market that's available, those sorts of things. And so that's I, that's my recollection of why we went with acquisition over other options. But I'll let Melissa, correct me if I did not get that, right.

Melissa Ocepek 30:21

Yes. And one thing I don't think we mentioned when we talked about the study is we ran the survey three times. So again, we were worried we missed the boat, but actually, we hit the bigger boat, which is we got September 2020, December 2020, and March 2021, which means we got right before the major wave, the middle of the major wave, and then right after when the first vaccines were coming out. So that created really interesting data. And as Brenna mentioned, she's continuing this work and hopefully will continue to publish on it in terms of a lot of these questions, just see how the longevity. But as far as that, so my, this is I think the best part of interdisciplinary work is Brenna is an [agricultural] economist, I am not I am an information scientist, I study how information behavior, how people make choices, right? And how people like, decide where to find information. So when we started talking, Brenna, I think had like this very, like, economic perspective, like here are all the ways you could study this. Myself, I've only studied grocery shopping by interviewing people and watching them grocery shop, to kind of understand that information process that was happening. So to me, I think, much like what Brennan said, it was really thinking about how we take the observation data that is real, and apply it to the perception data that oftentimes is interesting, but not always accurate. And I think, generally speaking, I'm always more interested in perception, because how people think they behave influences their behavior a lot. And so again, we wanted to make it something that wasn't too taxing, right that any person can probably remember, if they went to the grocery store, they might not remember everything they purchased, but they probably remember how they felt. If someone did, especially at this time, if someone did or did not have a mask, if someone was coughing, if they were if it felt crowded, or empty. And so I think that's, that's, that's what we went with, based on, you know, based on our- I feel like Brenda had like a science answer. And I'm like, it's because that's what we knew and felt comfortable with. But we did explore, we talked about many different options, and also what seemed feasible in terms of funding and time and- kind of all the all the factors that always go into research.

Brenna Ellison 32:40

Let's just say we left out your part two, which we should [not] do is like how, what sorts of pieces of information are people accumulating during this time? And like, yeah, are they looking for like deals coupons? Like those sorts of things. Are they looking for new recipes? Because they're bored, are they right? Like, what? Where? Are they getting the information? What are they needing? Are they trying to start their own garden at home? Just like all sorts of different things that they could be doing with information too. So you should not leave that out.

Melissa Ocepek 33:08

Yeah no that is true. And that's again, why it was so hard to make this 15 minutes survey.

Inbar Michael 33:12

Yeah, I can see how there can be a lot of research that can come just from grocery shopping. I still remember. Uh, you brought up like remembering when people wear masks or not alright, yeah, yep. I definitely thought about that. So it's very good point. Um, I don't know how to phrase this question. But it's kind of backtracking to like, the discussion of how ultimately like the kind of- I don't want to say like answer because it is a study. So it's like ongoing, but like, what was kind of seen throughout your research was that in person is still preferred in terms of shopping for groceries. And you brought up Dr.

Ocepek that there was like this element of like, being able to smell the food, touch the food, and to see it like in person. And so I don't know if this is a question that can be answered. But I guess I'm kind of curious. Like, because people were like, people have always thought that at some point, we transition to doing a lot of things online. Like even for me what I've heard about online, I didn't hear about grocery shopping, I heard about like, K-12 education and I feel like now people see how much more complicated that is to just do completely online. But I was asking, I'll see just make sense. Do you think that in the in person preference is also like a more? I don't know if it's like biological like, you know, like our noses above our mouth so that we can smell the food to make sure it's safe. Like do you think it's also I don't know if that makes sense. Like kind of related in that way as well.

Melissa Ocepek 34:57

I think it's maybe- the word you're looking for is evolutionary.

Inbar Michael 35:00

Yeah.

Melissa Ocepek 35:01

Like I think, um, you know, I think about- because I'm- like the first first person who ate a, an orange. Right? Like, how do you know there's food in there?

Melissa Ocepek 35:13

I was also just watching a TikTok video of a grocery clerk because I get a lot of grocery TikTok, as you can imagine. And someone said, this guy asked, How do you keep your bananas from going brown? And she's like, Well, what do you mean? And he's like, Well, you know, when I take them home, and I unpeel, [and I], put them on the counter, they get brown. And she's like, you're not supposed to unpeel them until you eat them. And you're like, and that is the- that's if you like, but if you study food, you find the weirdest things that people do and think and like. But what that what I mean by that is, I think the internet is not magic, but people want you to think it is because people like to believe in magic. And that is true for the internet. That's true for physics. That's true for a lot of technologies. It's it's true for Tesla and electric cars, right? People want a car that drives themselves. So they want to believe that that's a safe thing that we could have, without thinking about all the reasons why it's bad. And so, I wrote a chapter of a book years ago about Webvan, which was this big online grocery store chain, I mentioned it earlier, that went through \$2 billion in four years, because they thought that people want to buy groceries online. But if you just ask people they don't. And do, I think the percentage of people more comfortable with online grocery shopping will increase slightly, probably, I think the pandemic certainly has made some people more comfortable, and people more comfortable doing it some times. But most people still like the tangible aspects of food. Food is not like a digital music download, or an ebook, or even a sweater. You know, I mean, there are still people that don't like online clothes shopping, or they'll buy a shoe online, but not a sweater, right? Like, people are tactile people like smell and taste and touch, people like free samples. And you'll see this time and time again, when you study food. And so I do think there is a level of trust, I think it's a level of quality. And I think there is almost something evolutionary about you want to make sure that the things you buy, especially for your children, for your family are of a good quality. And that matters.

Inbar Michael 35:13

Yeah.

Brenna Ellison 36:13

I would say also, in addition to that, I think there's a socialization aspect that you know, even if you don't actually talk to people in the grocery store, it's still like you got out like you interacted with, like this human race. And I think that's actually something that's pretty important coming out of this where you were on lockdown for so long is like, and I have a spouse who works remote 100% of the time, he never wanted to go the grocery store before the pandemic happened. And now like I don't ever get to go by myself in peace because it's like his one chance to get out of the house and see other people and he like values that very much now. And so I think there's the evolutionary aspect but I also think there's kind of like some socialization aspect that that some people still really like wants and need in addition to the actual like wanting to experience the food itself.

Melissa Ocepek 38:27

I mean, pre-pandemic, there was a major trend in grocery stores, like the industry of making them more community spaces that my old grocery store in Texas had a restaurant they had live music on the weekend, they had a bar harvest market, and champagne bar and wine and music a lot of times they do like breakfast on the weekends and so that I think there was a fear in the industry that that was gonna go away during the pandemic and it did short term right but you know, the hot bars or the salad bars, like all of those things are the grocery store saying this is not just a place to buy stuff. This is a place to be- I mean, not to get too personal but Brenna and I pre-pandemic, we would work at harvest market because it was like a place with free Wi Fi where you could get lunch and like open tables. That wasn't on campus.

Inbar Michael 39:20

That's interesting, like, I didn't consider but like the socialization aspect. And now I'm like reflecting and thinking about how a lot of the grocery stores that are old- I'm from San Jose in California. So you mentioned Silicon Valley earlier. There's quite a good amount of cafes in grocery stores. So I never even thought about it as that being like a reason. So now I'm reflecting-

Melissa Ocepek 39:47

Inbar, have you been to Erewhon?

Inbar Michael 39:49

No.

Melissa Ocepek 39:50

Oh, they must have them in San Jose, though right at this point?

Inbar Michael 39:53

I think so. I've heard the name.

Melissa Ocepek 39:55

Okay. Brenna are you familiar with Erewhon? I went to one this summer. They sell a jar of tomato sauce for \$30.

Brenna Ellison 40:04

Fancy.

Inbar Michael 40:04

Whoa, is it large? Sorry, I'm curious.

Melissa Ocepek 40:09

The jar? No, it's a regular jar.

Inbar Michael 40:12

Wow.

Melissa Ocepek 40:13

Yeah. No Erewhon is for anyone who doesn't know a very high-end grocery store chain, I think only in California. But it very much is leaning into this. Like you get your smoothie there, you get your fresh fruit there, you get your fancy pastries there you get. And it's and it's like they don't sell reg- like, yeah, so it's like smaller Whole Foods that's also way more expensive and more of their own branding within. They do sell other products, products by other companies, but most of it is Erewhon.

Inbar Michael 40:46

Okay, I have-

Melissa Ocepek 40:48

When you go back to San Jose, you have to go to one. Don't spend any money there. But-

Inbar Michael 40:52

Don't think I can afford \$30-

Melissa Ocepek 40:54

No you can't afford it. Just go to walk and see the people that can and be like, what is happening to our country?

Inbar Michael 41:01

Yeah.

Melissa Ocepek 41:03

[Inaudible] \$30 on a jar of tomato sauce.

Inbar Michael 41:06

We're actually visiting. You know what, I'll tell this after the interview, because I don't want this to be recorded. It's not too personal. But it's kind of silly to have people listen to that. But okay, um, did you

have any sort of like hypothesis that you would potentially see as an outcome? Or you were kind of just going into this just wanting to see what would happen? I mean, I guess for research you kinda have to.

Brenna Ellison 41:34

Honestly, I think, you know, what I was interested in finding out I don't know that I had a, like specified hypothesis was really like, is online going to take over? Like, is it really gonna happen? And are people like, to what extent are people behaving the way sis-, like, the government would suggest they should, in terms of restaurants. Like those are my personal interests. Like, who is behaving the way that we're, quote unquote, supposed to be? And then, yeah, I really was interested in the online piece. Because, yeah, we've been told for decades, that's what's going to take over. And if it was going to happen, it would be now. So that was what I was most interested in.

Melissa Ocepek 42:14

I think I was in terms of hypothesis, I sort of, you know, I say this a lot. Nothing new- Nothing old- Nothing new is an old, wait what do I say a lot. See this is a problem. I don't even know what I say a lot. But not- there's nothing new in the world. It's all just a repeat of things that have happened before. And so I was [inaudible] that my hypothesis was much more because this was a national sample, about the differences in region, political affiliation age, I thought, you know, young people do more online, old people would be less, but still, like, you know, grocery shopping less. And I don't even remember grocery stores even had like hours for older people, you know, to try to keep the store population lower. And so that was more what I was what I sort of had, I was like, I think I know how this was playing out. But not, you know, I, I also feel like, this was very exploratory work, and that we all thought we knew was going on. But because there was so much turmoil, I mean, because so many things had changed. And we were entering. And this is something we talked about a lot a new phase of the pandemic, there was always a new phase of the pandemic. It was like people were adjusting, but also there were new things they were thinking about. And yeah, so.

Inbar Michael 43:30

Yeah, that makes sense. I was curious as to what your thoughts are going in. And then we were curious if this was like a project funded by grants, or, um, I guess I'm not too familiar with how research works when you conduct it as doctoral, or doc, professors, I want to see if that was [inaudible].

Brenna Ellison 43:56

I. So I think, in general, we split the costs. And I think for both of us, the money came out of like, when you get a position, right? They give you some funds to help yourself kind of like what they call startup just to get your research program going. I believe that's where the money came from, jointly between the two of us.

Melissa Ocepek 44:13

Yes, we did look into some grants, like options early. But the problem with grant funding and you'll hear this when you talk to more researchers is it takes a long time. And we didn't have the time. So we were basically like, Can we do this at a price point where we can pay for it with the money we have. And maybe turn that into a future grant. I don't know. But we were everything we looked at either was already done. Again, because the childcare- like there were some like emergency research fund that

happened right at the beginning. So it was either gone or would take too long to get it in time to make it useful. And so we just, you know, kind of made you know, we Tim Gunn[ed] it we made it work with the money we had and the resources we had, we were lucky that we both had students who we had either funds to already fund them, or they were interested in doing it more on a volunteer basis for course, credit or things like that. And so we just, we made it work.

Inbar Michael 45:16

Okay. Yeah, that was something I was curious about. I did not know how funding works in regards to research.

Melissa Ocepek 45:24

I can explain it to you anytime you want to come to my office hours.

Inbar Michael 45:26

Okay. Sounds- no it's very interesting. The more- yeah, I used to not be as interested in research. And now I become way more interested.

Melissa Ocepek 45:39

I can Also talk to you about that.

Inbar Michael 45:41

Yes.

Melissa Ocepek 45:41

There are many opportunities here at the University of Illinois.

Inbar Michael 45:44

That's true. Yeah. I've changed my mind over the past couple of years. So I will definitely send an email [inaudible]. We were curious about how you like, some of your methods for gathering the data? Like, how did you find survey participants? Like, how did you get the word out to get responses.

Brenna Ellison 46:08

So we did nationally representative panels, and how that works is like, you might be familiar with Qualtrics survey platform, like there's a license on campus. So most people just know Qualtrics, for the platform itself, but you can actually contract with them to get like panels of participants for your research project. And so essentially, we hire Qualtrics to find participants for us, so we don't have to do it ourselves. And so what they do is they set quotas for whatever characteristics you want your sample to be representative on. So I believe we had gender, age and common geographic region that we were most concerned about being representative on. And then they basically, fill the survey until they can get those quotas to match the way that you want them to. So the nice thing about using a service like that is the data comes in pretty quickly, it would be pretty hard for us to find 1000 participants on our own in an eff- manner, that would be quick. But in this case, when you use these services, you can usually get 1000 responses within seven to 10 days, which is nice.

Inbar Michael 47:16

Wow. Okay,

Melissa Ocepek 47:17

I do want to note, and someday, Brenna, and I will write this paper, probably when my book project [inaudible] over in January, about how the data quality varied drastically between our three waves. So we call the three waves, the three through surveys. September was good, December was terrible. And March was okay. What we think happened there. And we're interested in how other researchers are recording reporting this out, too, is that the combination of COVID the holidays, and just burnout, fatigue, just kind of everything that we are also very much digging ourselves out of meant that people were taking the survey, but they were not giving us real answers. And one way you see that is what's called is it flat-? its not flatlining, it's straight-

Brenna Ellison 47:17

Yep.

Brenna Ellison 48:06

Straightlining. Yeah, we don't- they did not die.

Melissa Ocepek 48:08

Straightlining which means they just put BBB BBB right? And there are ways you can within surveys like you do, like attention checks something we didn't do that because again, we tried to keep the survey short. But you can see that very easily, right? If everyone puts B, that's probably it's statistically unlikely that every person's answer is B. So we clean the data and take those out. But so what that meant is that the actual usable responses that we had 1000, and all of our waves was different. And so I just think if we're going to talk about data collection, we have to include that piece, which is that by December of 2020, nobody was feeling generous with their time, energy, not- and I do not fault them for that at all. Because Qualtrics, I should say, it pays them, right, they get like a small amount of money or points or whatever the system is.

Inbar Michael 49:00

Okay. That makes sense that's really quick. I mean, yeah, I don't know, I guess in my head I was expecting like, I know, this doesn't really make sense, given the context of COVID was like, I don't know, go up to people [inaudible]-

Melissa Ocepek 49:17

Well, so historically, no, that's what I did. I mean, I, when I was collecting data for my dissertation, I put flyers up I went to like a Baby and Me classes. I, that's not an uncommon way to recruit. In fact, again, Inbar, if you're interested in this, our research methods courses, I'm happy to talk about this at length. I love that. Recruiting is very difficult, and that's why we made the choice in terms of time that it just made sense. And we were able to again have, but it cost a lot of money. I mean, it's not right? It's cheaper to do it yourself, but it's far more time consuming and quite honestly, there has been in maybe you've heard in the news, like political response rates are going down and people aren't answering the phone to do like surveys [where people will vote for president]. That is true across research. And so

what were considered like quality response rates for something like mailing out surveys or calling a bunch of phone numbers have just precipitously decreased over time. And there's a lot of factors for that. But it's becoming harder and harder to find people to give you their time. And energy, I think that there are other tools that can be heard of Mechanical Turk. So Mechanical Turk is Amazon's survey taking tool you can anyone can do it, my understanding is, but a lot of researchers do it where you basically put something up and you pay people a small amount of money. I actually used to before I was a PhD, I my first job out of college was working for a survey research company. I don't even know if I- I must have told Brenna, this at some point, but I was just like an executive assistant, but it was basically a private company that brands would pay. And they would like send out surveys about like new Pepsi logos, and then give people points and they could use those points for like coupons or money and things like that. So there's like a whole research infrastructure in both the private sector and the public's research sector.

Inbar Michael 51:07

Okay. And then, you mentioned that there were three, like, times that you sent out surveys, or you had surveys sent out to participants. And why did you decide to gather data from these particular periods? So I think it was September 2020, December 2020, and then March 2021. So yeah, why those points in time?

Brenna Ellison 51:39

Well, I mean, again, we kind of like lucked out, it wasn't I mean, we didn't know what was going to happen, right? Yeah. But we wanted to span like a longer period of time, then other groups had done so monthly just didn't feel like long enough. Like, we wanted the progression of the pandemic to change. So we can see if behavior also changed with it. And we didn't know what would happen. But we picked quarterly to try to cover more time. Really, that's what we were trying to do. And then fortunately, I guess for us, right? It, it was like a relatively like good fall, going into like really bad wave one winter, then vaccines coming out. And like people are feeling more optimism in March. So we really hit like, very different points of at least like the first year of the pandemic, and could observe like how that kind of translated to people's behavior. But, you know, we set the quarterly schedule before we knew what was happening. So part of it is really serendipitous.

Melissa Ocepek 52:40

And going back to the childcare issue, I think September was the earliest we could get it done.

Brenna Ellison 52:45

Prior, we didn't want it monthly, because like it was hard for us to turn it around, right? Like we, again, because of childcare and teaching and other things like we needed the break in between two so we could actually do something with the data when it came.

Melissa Ocepek 53:00

Yeah, and try to do all the other parts of our job. And but also, then, I mean, you know, we also had to think about other factors. So if you're gonna run a survey in December, you want to at the beginning of December, not the end of December, we were setting foods, we didn't want to do too close to Thanksgiving or Christmas. So I think we did like December 16 was like-

Brenna Ellison 53:20

I think we tried. Yeah, like, we try to do the first or second week, every month, like really, really.

Melissa Ocepek 53:25

So we I mean, it was a detailed process to kind of figure out what made sense, what was feasible, and we did block out, we also were watching and you know, as both people who live on planet Earth, and scholars, I think we were very much keeping up with the trends. So we could kind of see as well as capture, like what was happening at those moments were when we would eventually write the research. Okay, I remember looking at the New York Times, like COVID chart, which was on their homepage for months, like regularly to kind of see what was happening in terms of COVID to think about how our survey was what was our survey capturing at that moment? Because sometimes it felt like the days let alone the weeks were different.

Inbar Michael 54:12

Right. And from this, like from these data collections. What did you notice? So like, this is- I know we briefly mentioned a bit earlier that the results were that in person grocery shopping was still widely popular. But were there any notable differences between like the three different times we collected the data and how did they differ in that case?

Brenna Ellison 54:45

Yeah, so at least first pass we saw a lot of the different ways people get food spiked in December. So we saw spikes in meal kits, we saw spikes in going to a food pantry. We just saw spikes in a lot of things. So it was- December was just kind of a weird month like one, there are holiday things happening, like people are behaving different. I think we even saw a spike in farmers markets, which doesn't make sense in December, except that holiday markets are happening. So December had had this weird spike for a lot of activities. But interestingly, like, grocery shopping in person stayed flat takeout just kept going up. Honestly, and I think at least what I took away from it is despite like the high rates of shopping in person, online still stayed pretty high. And so what that means is like, there's a not small portion of hybrid shoppers now. And like we're seeing that now, in 2022, as we keep those data collection going, this hybrid shopping approach is not going away. And so I think one of your later questions is like, what, what are you doing next, like, that is the project we hope to do next is really dig into these hybrid shoppers and find out how are they dividing up like their grocery shopping? Like, you know, are you actually using different stores? Are you just using the same store, but buying only like perishable things in person, nonperishable, like, what frequency? Are you using them, and just really trying to dig in. And the other thing that I've kind of with hybrid shoppers is just try to see who they are. And is it changing throughout the pandemic. And so at least early kind of initial things is like, much more likely to be young people, educated people but and people with kids. So I think that's kind of interesting, too. But it has like there has been some shifts in the pandemic like big household started out being that way, but they're not really anymore. So there's just kind of some interesting things. So that's something that really stood out to me. I was surprised that not only was in person popular, but online was surprisingly like staying popular. So I think that was kind of interesting, which tells us like more intersection than I think previously occurred.

Melissa Ocepek 57:03

Yeah, honestly, just talking about now I'm reflecting on how- Brenna you said a couple times now, if online was going to catch on, this was the moment but also online was so bad because of the upheaval. And so I have to imagine because that's not been my lived experience. But that things have mellowed out, right? Like I still when I go to the store regularly see the employees with the cards like filling the online orders. I know that Target here, their drive up section has like quadrupled. And so I and that was something that existed before the pandemic but I think this hybrid shopper exactly what Brenna's talking about, which is interesting and thinking about again. There are some things like meat, fruit, produce, bread that people want to touch they want to feel but then like an Oreo is an Oreo is an Oreo a can of Coke, it doesn't vary across the stores. So you go with the cheapest one. Or if you just need a quick you get an on Instacart because you don't like there's a birthday party you forgot about you need 12 cupcakes, you know if you have kids or whatever.

Inbar Michael 58:12

Yeah, that- I wasn't sure if like my mom [was] considered hybrid groceries. But now that you've explained that, I think that kind of sounds like what she does, like, every two weeks, I'll see like this massive Target box outside her house, and it's filled with like, chips like [cook].

Melissa Ocepek 58:28

And did she do that before the pandemic?

Inbar Michael 58:33

No. So, yeah, no my parents definitely shop online more for things. Of course, like you said, the perishable items, they'll always- like my mom was very particular about her food, but it's like-

Melissa Ocepek 58:48

Your mom, your mom is not alone.

Inbar Michael 58:50

Yeah. I'm very much the same. But my mom- Um, so have you seen your research being used by others? Like what impact has it had on the fields that this research was published in?

Brenna Ellison 59:07

I think people have paid attention. But I do think it's a little hard for us to assess impact just yet only because of the lag in the publication process. So I have a paper where we published on like the stockpiling early on and that paper has been getting cited tons, the paper that Melissa and I have just really came out and so papers that our citing that are still probably like in the review process, so I think there will be some lag but I expect that very much like it's something that's going to be cited because people studying the pandemic and looking at food purchasing, food acquisition behaviors, like it's gonna be something that they're obviously going to find in like the existing literature. So I think you'll be flagged only because other people who write on this topic might still be in the review process, but I expect like it to be picking up just like the previous paper.

Melissa Ocepek 1:00:05

And I should say in addition to our article, we also did a couple of blog posts because we wanted to get the [state] out early and those have gotten some reach. So that does suggest that there is more impact to come. Also, Information Science plug, we publish in PLOS ONE, which is an open access journal. So it has wide readership. And Brenna I think did multiple press interviews of all. Pardon me around this topic. So people were definitely interested.

Brenna Ellison 1:00:37

Yeah, we definitely had like press outreach. We did press releases, like we did those things. So there has been interest. But I think if you think about metrics the way Melissa and I are expected to think about metrics like that, that's gonna be lagged for now. Until-

Melissa Ocepek 1:00:52

Hopefully before tenure.

Brenna Ellison 1:00:53

Hopefully before tenure, that's right.

Inbar Michael 1:00:57

So I didn't, I didn't write this question down. But now that I'm reflecting on what we've discussed. I as I was like, because I wanted to read your research for myself, before I went into this interview, I did see that there was there was another, I don't know if this is yours, or if it's like someone, like continued your work, but it's under your name. It's from Farmdoc Daily from Illinois, where there's a fourth survey, like from [May]. So is that like continuing?

Brenna Ellison 1:01:40

Yes, that's what I was talking about earlier, I have- I've got an ongoing project with people I was previously working with in my department at Illinois, where we're continuing a quarterly survey. It's not only about this, it's about a lot of different topics. But one of my requests was to keep this set of questions in so we could keep monitoring, like, longer than just the three time periods that Melissa and I have. So there's a bit of like a yearlong gap. But surprisingly, the results are saying like pretty consistent, like, in personal shopping still super high. But so is online. So really like behavior as- I guess if change occurred, it seems like the behaviors relatively persistent, although restaurants really have like jumped I think, like the restaurant behavior, people have returned to, I would say, some level of normalcy, but yeah.

Inbar Michael 1:02:32

Okay. Yeah, I was- that's what I came across now. And I was like, that's not in the original survey, or the original [inaudible]. Okay. And then, how do you think the research is going to inform us in upcoming crises? Any thoughts on the result? or Yeah-

Melissa Ocepek 1:03:01

I hope that this is a lesson for producers and for the grocery industry, which is that there are parts of food that are constant. And there are parts that are not, and so that flexibility, I think, is really important. You know, Brenna mentioned, the stockpiling research, I think there's gonna be a lot of kind of mean-

even Brenda mentioned with her other research, like, the supply chain has not fixed itself yet, and probably won't for maybe another two years, I think I'm hearing. And so thinking about not only the supply chain, but how the shopping behaviors inform the supply chain, right? Because if you're in a store, and you see the products are out, or you're on a website, and you see those things aren't available, that changes the calculus, you as a shopper make. And that's something we see across the board research, which is people are dynamic, they- even if you have a grocery list, you usually buy things that are on it. And so realizing that the way we are stocking the grocery store, the way that we're we're kind of setting it up is influencing the shopping, which obviously we know that's what marketing is, but that in a crisis, we need to be more active in I think- or the grocery industry needs to be more active in being cognizant of that and how those things are coming down to the consumer level. Because if the grocery store just held some of the toilet paper in the back an extra day and then put it out, that would have had an impact on the on the toilet paper shortage, right? So it's that kind of thing. I think that hopefully that's that's a big takeaway from our research, which is that people are going to keep shopping through crises. So how can we make the store make sense for the crisis, does that makes sense?

Inbar Michael 1:05:01

Yeah.

Brenna Ellison 1:05:02

Yeah. And I would add kind of two other things that, the other is like, consumers are multimodal shoppers, right? And so for retailers, again, like online shopping was ugly early on, like sometimes it would take a week to get your order processed, right? Like there were people I knew that could not go to the store for like medical concerns, and it would take a week for them to get their groceries, right. And so I think you'll see a push for like better optimization of like those sorts of platforms. It was also really important that SNAP benefits got expanded to online shopping, like our research [did] inform that, that we saw that snap, participants actually were more likely to use online shopping, which is a good development, they have more options available to them. So being prepared to allow consumers to shop in different ways. And then the second thing I would say is just in general, if we think about like the broader system, and how foods available, like restaurants are far more vulnerable to the shocks than grocery stores. And some of that was because policy made them that way and shut them down differently than they did grocery stores. But also, like labor shortages seem to impact restaurants much harder like it- So if we think about policy supports and future crises, right, like, obviously, we want the grocery store infrastructure to hold. But if we think about small businesses and restaurants, like they're far more vulnerable to kind of the shocks that this created.

Melissa Ocepek 1:06:30

And going back to the ghost kitchens, right? Having more dynamic availability of restaurants, right? Because there are in many places regulations about how I mean, I hope everywhere, there [are regulation] by how restaurants are run, but those influence things like how much takeout they can do, and how their kitchens are set up and things like that. So creating more dynamism in those spaces. And I'm sorry, I'm always on grocery track, because that's my brain. But yes, this this is a paper about food acquisition, how people are getting food, not just in the grocery space.

Inbar Michael 1:07:03

Right. Okay. And kind of like, as a wrap up question for like, the main questions were asking about your research. Have you considered like other COVID-19 research projects? Or were you working on anything else during the pandemic that is related? Or not related, but COVID-19 based?

Brenna Ellison 1:07:28

So like I mentioned, I'm hoping with Melissa, we've not really sat down and talked about it, but I am hoping to do this deeper dive into hybrid shoppers. Beyond that. I'm trying to think like, it definitely have some projects kind of related to also food waste and how people have thought about that during the pandemic and how creative they're getting to avoid it, because the pandemic and inflation jointly have created situations where people don't want to waste their food. So kind of thinking through some of that.

Melissa Ocepek 1:08:00

Yeah, I definitely want us to do hybrid shoppers. I mean, I've been- that's the funny thing, too, is like not to, but like I have literally been studying online grocery shopping for 10 years. And it's like, again, tragedy, sometimes is a windfall for some like, it just happened that this pandemic meant that people couldn't leave their houses and so they had to figure how to get food and that's something I've been thinking about a long time. But for other projects, I am currently working with Merin Oleshuk and Brenna and Melissa Pflugh Prescott and a wonderful team of RAs [Research Assistants] on this project called Cooking For One, it- its origin isn't in the pandemic, but the pandemic has a major impact on it. Because what it is, is it's setting people who live alone. And then we are, well, most of the interviews occurred last summer. And so very much we talked about the double isolation of living alone, during a pandemic. Now that project continues and we'll it will evolve past the pandemic. But the pandemic does kind of highlight isolation. And that's really what the project is about, which is how do people eat, cook, go out, acquire food when they live alone? Because as maybe you have experienced as young people who maybe do live alone or live with a roommate, the grocery store, and most of the food world is designed for families, not for individuals. And so that is a project that is I would say, tangentially related to the pandemic.

Inbar Michael 1:09:35

Yeah, yeah, I was reflecting on- because I live by myself during the pandemic, because the university was kind enough to give us our own rooms. So that was a time but thank you both for sharing, um, to kind of wrap things up in our last 15 minutes. I mean, to kinda ask some like more reflective questions about COVID And this research in general. Do you think that COVID, the COVID-19 pandemic has permanently affected how our society thinks about and acquires food? Do you think it's, I mean-

Melissa Ocepek 1:10:19

It's complicated.

Brenna Ellison 1:10:21

Yeah. I think there are some changes. But I'm also like, I don't think if a crisis happens again, we'll be any better in terms of like, will we not stuck, like, will we still stockpile? Yes, I think so. So I think,

unfortunately, I'm skeptical that we've like, learned to behave better if we haven't had a crisis happen. I do-

Melissa Ocepek 1:10:46

I think that's an individual thing. I like to think and believe that structures- because I don't think I think individual will stop at. I like to think the structure will realize the strain that it put itself into and might change. Sorry.

Brenna Ellison 1:11:04

I mean I do think like, there's a lot of policy efforts to try to, like disaggregate bits of the food system, right? Because like, during the pandemic, right, one huge meat plant went down, and like all of a sudden, a region of the country can't get meat, right. And so like, there's been a lot of policy pushes to, like, try to make the food system more resilient. So in that sense, like, yes, we might have some long term changes in how people think about food, and be like, at an individual level of day to day, I think you might still, unfortunately, see like, people fall into the same patterns if like another apocalypse seeming crisis happens.

Melissa Ocepek 1:11:38

I actually think too, because I've been reflecting a lot on the larger pandemic changes. And I do think something I feel like I'm seeing is across the globe, an increased protests, culture, I don't know if you're following the news. But there's sort of massive protests never before seen in China right now in Iran, in places where usually you don't see that kind of protest. And I think it is, because the pandemic broke a lot of people's understandings of a lot of things, they broke a lot of structures and a lot of trust in those structures. But in terms of food, I'm now you're giving me a new research idea, which is, because for most of us, we could still go to the grocery store. It didn't change that much. I mean, you know, I went less often, I went at a different time I went 9am on Mondays, which is not my favorite time to do anything. But my grocery shopping was kind of my normal place my safe place. Because I still went and I still picked it up. I had a mask on. And I was like very cognizant of other people around me, but I still did it. And so I actually think from the consumer standpoint, a lot of that normalcy was there and is gonna continue. While maybe everyone got a little bit more comfortable with Amazon orders and Target big boxes and the occasional Instacart.

Inbar Michael 1:13:05

Now that you mentioned that I don't know if this is a case across the country, or if it was like very regional dependent, because I was in California and mostly, I think this is like, when I was in San Jose, when I went shopping with my mom. They would not even let us like touch like, like we could touch but only if we were going to take it. We couldn't okay.

Melissa Ocepek 1:13:33

That was a thing. I don't know how many people followed it. But yeah, yeah, we're like everyone had the gloves, you know, that those gloves by the carts people would put on and they wipe down the carts. That material was always there, right? The wiping on the cart swaps at most grocery stores was there beforehand, but suddenly during the pandemic, everyone's using it.

Inbar Michael 1:13:53

My mom has always use those. But yeah, the not being able to touch the food definitely threw us off. But- I just wasn't sure if that was something that was occurring in other places as well. And then I know that we probably already did touch on this. But if there's anything else, like were there other challenging parts of researching during the pandemic, I know that having small children definitely has an impact. But were there other things that you were kind of juggling at the same time that made that more difficult?

Brenna Ellison 1:14:29

I mean, I think just a general lack of motivation, like on top of the childcare, it was just like, I felt like I was always consuming the news and honestly just in like, a depressed funk. [who] was like, when are vaccines coming out? Like my child's never gonna get one like, it took two years, right? Like we're never gonna be able to do anything like we can't see grandparents or grandparents want to come in like they live in a place where people don't care about vacc-, right? Like it was so like you just felt so all-consuming that you just I could not, like succumb any amount of motivation to want to be excited about research. And thankfully I had tenure, and it was in a place that that's an OK outcome. And I know they offer tenure rollbacks. And I think that's a really good thing for COVID. But it just was like such a soul sucking endeavor for that first year, like it was just so hard to like, get back on track. Other than teaching, I felt like you had to make the teaching work. That's all I could like muster the energy to do personally.

Melissa Ocepek 1:15:36

I feel a little different. I am now so burned out because the way my anxiety worked was I just threw myself into work. I was finishing a book project that was due May 2020. And we turned it in June, which is amazing. Because again, no childcare, and I was an editor and I was writing a chapter and my chapter was the last one, but it's out it's somewhere it's on my bookshelf. So work was a nice distraction until it was until like you hit that COVID wall. I think we talked I mean, at the time, I remember talking with many people at the COVID wall, which is just being in like, my house is nice. I have a dog, I have a cat, I have a lovely child who sometimes behaves. But you just yeah, that- going back to the protest, I think we lost a lot of hope and faith in institutions. Illinois was truly amazing at the beginning, especially compared to some of the horror stories you heard, but at some point, just like the infrastructure of higher education, much like a restaurant infrastructure doesn't do well when people can't be together. And so I think that made a lot of people question a lot of things about where their time is going to where their energy is going to. And so like I, unlike Brenna didn't have tenure still don't working on it. I actually have different feelings about rollbacks to but in part because if it's a global pandemic, then it's not an individual's problem, they should just give us all tenure for surviving is my take, but especially surviving and teaching. And I think overall, like being a supportive community who cared for each other, like that should be valued as much as whether or not I published 10 or 12 articles last year, or whatever the metrics are. So but I think, yeah, and that's actually, again, not to bring it back to our research. But when everything is chaos, what are the things you can count on are like food, shelter, and like family? And so research, not that important teaching more important, because there's a human connection, right? Like, I mean, I don't know, Brenna, if you just felt like you had to, but like, I got a lot of comfort from my students at that time. I'm just talking to them and sharing and reflecting and

being open. And, yeah, so I think it really reset a lot of people's brains about what matters. I hope, I hope it did. It certainly did with me and many other people in my life.

Inbar Michael 1:18:14

Kind of relating to that. How has the pan- How do you think the pandemic has, if it has, like changed the goals and priorities of your departments or like the fields that you worked in?

Brenna Ellison 1:18:35

I think my field was already trending this way a little, they were finally being progressive enough to get like daycare at conferences, etc. But I think on the whole, like, there [isn't] at least an appreciation that people have lives outside of their research. Ad I think, right, like even though we very much can have conferences in person, like they're still offering Zoom options to allow people to participate like one if they're nervous about the virus or two, like they just don't want to be away from their home, their family, things that are important to them, but, you know, still be engaged with their academic community. And so I would say in my field that at least like we're being generous enough to like, acknowledge that people do have lives outside of their work and research.

Melissa Ocepek 1:19:28

That sounds nice. We don't have that yet. Actually just sent an email about a conference that I was like, So what are the childcare options? Cause there weren't any this year and I would like that especially cause I published with a single mom who has a kid and like what is she supposed to do? Um, but I think that I think also in the good thing I think in information science is there has been a stronger embrace of DEIA related material, which is diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility. I think, the pandemic showed how many systems are so fragile showed how many people aren't tech bros, I don't know. I kinda tend to, not to overgeneralize, but it's a field that really values a couple of things. And those things are technology, information, organization, libraries, and libraries were closed, right. Storytimes went online copyright fair use kind of expanded, like, there were just a lot of things that I would say was more user focus was more people focused. And I actually do see that in conferences. And the field now is, I think that was a combination of the pandemic, and the Black Lives Matter, protests and many other things that are happening at the same time, but I think the pandemic was directly related to it. Because I think people that never or didn't, I shouldn't say never, didn't typically have to reflect a lot on the impact of the research or the human side of the research. Suddenly, when we're all stuck inside kind of just sitting kind of reflected on that kind of stuff. And, and that is a positive.

Inbar Michael 1:21:13

Those are good point. I didn't think about conferences, and how if they were only in person, and one has children, that there's the I mean, I also I'm not a parent, but um, there's just so many factors that the more you hear about this, the more you realize there's just so many things that need to be improved.

Melissa Ocepek 1:21:35

I'll say myself, I actually prefer in person conferences, because I have a child. Because like, if I, we did a virtual conference, it was on a weekend, I never work on weekends, but I have a four year old. What that meant is like the four year old was sitting here sometimes during the conference, or my partner

was was taking up more of the load, right, like I do have a partner that is helpful. Not everyone has that not everyone should be expected to have another person that can drop what they're doing to take care of a kid right? We need more infrastructure. So yes, but I think making sure that no matter your reality you should be able to participate is I think, a change, and that's positive. And let's keep that working. Because there have always been people that couldn't come to conferences. That's not- it just when it happened to everyone suddenly, it became everyone's problem.

Inbar Michael 1:22:24

Yeah, I hope so. Um, I've already heard among my friends in situations where like, their needs are not being accommodated in school in terms of like, virtual or like extensions. And I'm just like that. We cannot be doing that after this.

Melissa Ocepek 1:22:38

Well, that's one thing. It completely broke my belief in deadlines. The pandemic, I was like, I don't care. I was like, I need to grade you at some point. And I want to because you're- I want to give you feedback on your awesome work that you're putting time and effort into. But if it comes in three weeks late, fine. If it can't be a paper, but now it's zine, okay, let's figure out a way to create like, so many of the rules I had about teaching just completely fell. I don't take attendance. I was like, I don't want to surveil you. Let's not I mean, if you want to turn on your camera, great. If not, no worries like, I Yeah.

Brenna Ellison 1:23:16

Yeah, I will never give an exam again. Like I took them out. Like, I'll give quizzes, but it's just why create more anxiety when we're already like drowning in it. So I didn't fully abandon deadlines, because I just mentally like, my brain is I need them otherwise, I will get nothing done. But in general, like compassion for other people, I feel like definitely, for me, I thought I was already fairly nice human, I think like trying to be even more like, you know, giving grace like just meeting people where they are and just being okay, when it doesn't meet the expectations or doesn't meet what like what you thought was going to happen. Like, that's something I think is a good outcome. Yeah.

Melissa Ocepek 1:24:05

I just learned this mantra, deadlines are for structure not stress. And I thought it was the other way around.

Brenna Ellison 1:24:14

Yeah, I need them for structure definitely. I need to like keep myself somewhere.

Melissa Ocepek 1:24:19

I put that on my syllabus in the spring, deadlines are for structure not stress. Right.

Inbar Michael 1:24:23

Yeah, I do appreciate the structure, but like, knowing that I could get an extension [inaudible] helps it like, manage the anxiety of both like, I have enough time like and I can plan it out. But also if I need more time with that's an option. But-

Brenna Ellison 1:24:40

I guess for me, like just the last thing that I learned somehow get your last question like surprisingly, like, you can have community on Zoom. Like I think I was really skeptical before and I was like, this is gonna be the most miserable like existence, but I mean, I've moved institutions like I can see to talk with Melissa all the time on Zoom, and we couldn't have met in person anyways or like, you know, weren't able to because have kids early on or like all these things, and I have another collaborator, we started collaborating right before COVID. And then we, we've still never met in person, but I feel like I have like a whole new best friend and I talked to her all the time. And it's like, that, I don't think I would have known that was possible, like, without zoom without being forced to use it nonstop. And so I- and even like, you know, with family, we live 15 hours away from family, like, you know, you all probably know, like, FaceTime is a good thing. Like, I guess like, that's something that I was really skeptical about before, but I'm really glad is something that came out of this, like, I can still advise my student and feel like I have a close relationship with her even though I'm not physically at Illinois anymore. And so that's something that's been like really important for me as a takeaway too.

Melissa Ocepek 1:25:56

That's, that's so well said. And Brenna, we do need to Zoom again soon. It's been a minute.

Brenna Ellison 1:26:00

Or go to like [meet, in Indi], that was my other.

Melissa Ocepek 1:26:03

Okay, I do have another meeting at 11. So I do [have to run]. But I thank you both so much. I'm so excited about this project, and I can't wait to see how it all comes together. And-

Brenna Ellison 1:26:16

Yeah, this is really fun.

Inbar Michael 1:26:17

Thank you so much [taking the time].

Jessie Knoles 1:26:20

Yeah, it was great hearing about your experiences and your research. So thank you.

Inbar Michael 1:26:25

Okay, thank you both so much. We'll see you bye.