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<td><strong>First Author:</strong></td>
<td>Serena Pollastri, Ph.D.</td>
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| **Corresponding Author:** | Serena Pollastri, Pd.D.  
Lancaster University  
Bailrigg, Lancaster, Lancashire UNITED KINGDOM |
| **Corresponding Author Secondary Information:** | Serena |
| **Corresponding Author E-Mail:** | s.pollastri@lancaster.ac.uk |
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House of cards. Fragility and resilience of food systems in a pandemic

Serena Pollastri¹

¹ImaginationLancaster, Lancaster University
s.pollastri@lancaster.ac.uk

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House of cards. Fragility and resilience of food systems in a pandemic

On the 4th of November 2020, my almost two years old son woke up from his afternoon nap with a bit of a fever. What would usually be an unremarkable occurrence for a toddler, this time made us worry about how to get food for our family for the next couple of days.

D’s preschool class was put into quarantine only a few of days before, after a member of staff had received a positive test for COVID-19. His dad and I had been alternating childcare duties and work, and today was my turn to look after our son. D’s dad was at work, and had planned to pick up groceries on the way home, to replenish our almost empty fridge and pantry. But now, with D developing COVID-like symptoms, we were all advised to self-isolate immediately, and until we could book a test and receive negative results. A positive test for even just one of us three would have meant self-isolation for the whole family for two more weeks.

As I waited for my partner to get back from work, I started thinking about the missed grocery shopping. We could likely scramble enough together for the evening, but it was definitely time to schedule a delivery from a local grocery store. However, all of the main supermarkets offering delivery services to the area where we live did not have any available spot for at least 10 days. As it often happens, frustration led to procrastination, which in turn led to social media, which led me to a chat with the owner of a local bakery, who was “of course!” happy to drop off some bread at the end of the day. Energised by the discovery, I called a local food cooperative, which, for a small fee, arranged the delivery of a large box of fruit and vegetables for the following day.

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In the context of the global pandemic of 2020 (and 2021) the episode above is certainly mundane – an experience that many can probably relate to. But it is in moments like this that we are reminded of the glitches in the sleek and efficient futures that we designed yesterday, and that pervade today’s interactions with many goods and services.

Yesterday, we thought of online supermarkets as the future, but it was smaller shops that today showed resilience, effectiveness, and adaptability. Yet, the lure of techno-driven innovation leads us to trust virtual portals and mobile application for the efficiency and safety that their sleek design communicate, over traditional mom-and-pop shops, even if these are only a phone call away. But when disruptions happen, we are reminded of the complex and very material logistics and geographies that these marketplaces rely upon (Beckers et al., 2018; Murphy, 2007).

In the early months of the pandemic, China was the Country who first had to deal with massive disruptions to its food supply chain. These were mostly a result of strict lockdown measures impacting mobility of produce and the availability of labour. In addition, the sudden shut down of all hospitality businesses meant that farmers had to deal with unsold produce, some of which risked being left unpicked in the fields. As the traditional food systems collapsed, large e-commerce enterprises provided farmers with alternative channels for direct sales to consumers, by giving them spaces for live-streaming and helping them set up online stores (Hao, 2020). Reflecting on lessons learnt from China’s quick response to the pandemic, Fei and Ni (2020) cite multi-stakeholder collaboration, diversity of distribution channels, and local food production and networks among the key factors to ensure resilience and sustainability.
Food looks deceivingly simple by the time it gets to our kitchen, but whether it comes from a small shop, a large supermarket, an online marketplace, or a direct producer, it is always part of a larger, complex system. This is true not only when it comes to processed food, but also for raw fruit, vegetables, and animal produce. And because all of us need constant access to food in order to survive, we are bound to be dealing with such complexities every day. Further, as food is the only thing that we own which, through ingestion, literally becomes part of who we are, our relationship with such complexities is an intimate one (Lupton, 1996). When the stories of the food we eat are made visible, they can challenge our values and make us question otherwise trivial choices.

Historical trajectories and the legacy of decisions taken in the past are tangible in today’s food systems, particularly when it comes to infrastructure and values (Clune & Pollastri, 2020). The design of food infrastructures can impact our ability to hold up to our values and cultural beliefs when it comes to food, while societal values and beliefs often shape the decision-making processes that are involved in the design of food infrastructures.

In “Edible Speculations”, Dolejšová invites us to explore the possibility of Tarot reading as a playful way of crafting and discussing participatory visions of food futures. When used as a tool for world building, cards could become a starting point to explore and discuss complex systems, shuffle their elements, and create prototypes and critiques through these combinations. As a fictional world, the deck of card contains innumerable possibilities, some of which are potentially dissonant or conflicting. In a year that showed us the importance of resilience, diversity, and connectedness when it comes to food system, I read Dolejšová’s paper as an invitation to understand and engage with the deep implications of food futures in the making. An invitation to critique, collaborate, discuss, and most importantly, listen.

Reference
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