Welcome to Office Hours. A production of the Office of University Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, and an opportunity for Penn's professors to engage in discussion a little more unbuttoned than they might be used to in the lecture hall.

Today, we step into the office of Julia Ticona, Assistant Professor of Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication, who studies the digital transformation of the workforce, the phenomenon of the gig economy, and the sociological imagination. Here, she talks takeaways from her upcoming book about digital hustle and independent workers, a new collaborative project grant from the National Science Foundation in which she'll be studying the crowdsourcing marketplace and the people behind it, and which superpower she'd opt for between flying, being invisible, and migrating.

Okay, welcome to Office Hours.

Thank you.

How are you doing this drizzly Thursday morning?

I'm dry. I have a raincoat. I'm feeling pretty good about it.

Yeah, it seems we're finally getting actual fall weather, so it's exciting.

Maybe, maybe.

So you do a lot of research and analysis of digital communication technologies, correct?

Yes, correct.

Yes.

Accurate fact.

I got that right.

Yes.

And the gig economy and the impact of those two things on workers at the bottom of the totem pole essentially, right?

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

So, can you tell me a little bit more about the big picture of what you study, just at like a really high level for people to understand?
Julia Ticona: Sure. Yeah, I was actually thinking about this yesterday as I admitted to you that I had peeped on previous episodes of this podcast. And I was realizing that a lot of what the other scholars that you talk to do is they kind of have to figure out a way, and this is a very common scholarly thing, challenge, that you have to be like, "What I study is really abstract and theoretical, but here's why it's relevant to your everyday life," and I actually am always in the position of doing the exact opposite, of saying, "Yeah, we all do this stuff, we know it." It seems extremely mundane and something we shouldn't even have to really think about anymore; a lot of these activities we take for granted, a lot of these technologies we take for granted now. And I'm usually in the position of going, "Look at how theoretically interesting this is, scholars," right?

Julia Ticona: So, it's often that switch that's the more difficult one for me to do. So-

Speaker 1: I guess that's the nature of sociology [crosstalk 00:02:35]-

Julia Ticona: Yeah, a little bit. A little bit. That's right. That's right. It's the sociological imagination, right? Which is figuring out how to think about your own personal problems or the individual problems of the people around you as social problems.

Speaker 1: That's a real term?

Julia Ticona: Yes.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Julia Ticona: Yes, it is. So, what I do as a very high level, I try to understand the ways that the people who we don't necessarily assume to be affected by the "digital transformation" of the workforce, or the emergence of new technologies of work, or AI, right? Thinking about these like real high-flying technical Silicon Valley kind of terms, the way that those technologies and that those transformations are actually affecting all of us in much different ways maybe than might be visible to people like you and I sitting on this college campus.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Julia Ticona: But I am always looking at the ways that people make sense of these technologies in their everyday lives and the ways that they make meaning of them with the existing kind of cultural ideas that are around them.

Speaker 1: And for you, that started with the phone, the cellphone?

Julia Ticona: Yeah.
Can you talk a little bit about that experience of like, the observation of how the cell phone is impacting people who maybe hadn't really thought about it that way before?

Definitely. So, there are kind of two different stories that I tell about this. One of them is the scholarly story, and one of them is the actual story about how I got interested in this-

Give us the actual story.

The actual story? Okay. So, the actual story is that I come from a really small town, grew up my entire life in that tiny town, and most of the people that I was surrounded by were nurses and teachers and construction workers and fast food workers and manufacturing lineman and foreman and things like that. And everybody was always complaining about their phone. Everybody was always talking about being on a call to their boss or feeling tethered to their phone or feeling like their kids were calling them all the time at work when they shouldn't be or something like that. And this was just kind of as a product of not quite being a millennial, but almost. An elder millennial maybe.

And this is pre-smartphone?

This is kind of pre-smartphone, yeah. We were just like emerging into the smartphone era, right? And feeling like this was a normal part of my everyday life, was just like the adults around me were like, "Ugh, these cellphones are just ... it's really annoying." And then going to college and going to get my PhD and looking around me for the scholarship that was making sense of the way that people's phones related to their work or how people were thinking about these new technologies, these objects that they have to physically have on their bodies all the time.

And all I saw were studies of white-collar workers, right? Of people who were sitting in front of computers all day, who had to be on the email. They were using email a lot. And that was just not the situation that I needed to make sense of-

Yeah, because they weren't seeing what you were seeing?

No, not at all. But a lot of similarities, right?

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

They were still complaining about a lot of the similar things, they were feeling tethered, they were feeling overwhelmed, they were feeling like this was a new kind of imposition in their life, right? So there were a lot of cultural resonances there between the two different groups of people. But they could not have had different types of jobs, right? And so, it just seemed like this giant hole in the
literature that people weren't ... scholars, weren't necessarily interested in filling because I think there wasn't an acknowledgment that these technologies were actually important for these workers.

Julia Ticona: We had this very idealized and nostalgic image of what it's like to be in manufacturing, or what it's like to be a fast food worker, or something like that, that doesn't involve a whole lot of digital technology, and involves maybe like a cash register, or a machine on a assembly line that you ... you know, those are the technologies that are important for those workers. And that's true to some extent. But there are other ways that these same technologies that we know are effecting the world of white collar worker, also shaping people's jobs who are outside of that bubble.

Speaker 1: So, what were some discoveries as you talked to people about this?

Julia Ticona: One of the big discoveries was just these threads of similarity, where we would really expect to see difference and polarization. So, I should say from the sociological literature and also just from life, I think, over the last 10 years, we've seen a huge polarization in the job market, right? We see high wage jobs getting better and better and better. The workers are more and more autonomous, the kinds of skills that they require are bigger and bigger, more require college degrees and things like that, we're getting paid more. And on the bottom end of the job market, we're seeing he exact opposite, right? The jobs are getting worse and worse and worse. The new jobs that are being created have less autonomy, require fewer higher level skills, and we're really seeing a hollowing out of that middle range of jobs.

Julia Ticona: And so, I was surprised when I started interviewing folks and I should say that I focus my research on ... this is for my dissertation work, on independent workers, right? So, that that meant was a lot of different things and I'm happy to talk more about that too. So, these folks presumably all shared something about their relationship to the labor market because they were all independent workers of some kind. What that meant was very different on the [inaudible 00:08:44]. But what I found was that the way that they use their digital technologies and the way that they talked about them, especially in relationship to how they felt about their jobs and how they felt about being good at their jobs, was very similar. Which was really shocking, I think. So, that was the first sort of finding. But then the second finding was that the conditions in which people are using these technologies fundamentally shape those practices and those feelings, right? And obviously that's very different at the bottom and at the top.

Julia Ticona: So, the current book project that I'm working has kind of two goals, which is one is to say, wow, we're all way more similar that we think we might be, or that we might predict that we would be given this polarized labor market when it comes to thinking about our phones, especially in the context of gig work. And I should say too, the way that I think about gig work is from a more ... I guess from a
more sociological perspective, which is thinking about it as independent work and not just thinking about it as work that you get through a device or through a platform, which is a way that it's been kind of narrowed down.

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: And making the case for people who sit on campuses like this to care about other people who might not share the same kinds of jobs that they do, or maybe they might feel like they have nothing in common with those folks, that they actually have a ton in common and that we're kind of all in this boat together when it comes to dealing with these pressures of increased connectivity and increased need for these digital technologies in order to just earn money and make a living in the world.

Julia Ticona: So, that's the first goal, is this commonality goal. The second goal is though, to really show that the way that privilege and constraint work very differently within those two situations. So, what I found was that on the high end, that the high wage independent workers, so these people were like lawyers who graduated from prestigious law schools who decided to start working for themselves, right?

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julia Ticona: And they just wanted to take on their own clients, or they were-

Speaker 1: Right. That's where the gig economy gets a little tricky, because now ... I mean, you might think of like Uber or something like that-

Julia Ticona: Exactly.

Speaker 1: ... but you're not really acknowledging these higher end people [crosstalk 00:11:15]-

Julia Ticona: Yes. So there's-

Speaker 1: ... and I know people like this too, who just ... yeah.

Julia Ticona: Right, yeah. Or they work for another company for a long time and then they become a consultant or something, right?

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: Those people are independent workers, they are gig workers. They're not always considered under the umbrella of precarious work, which is often how we talk about gig work. But we can kind of think about the ways that the gig economy is this like much larger phenomenon and the precarious or the
platform part of gig work is like actually a much smaller group of people. But the
phenomenon of independent work is like huge in the United States.

Julia Ticona: So, the privileges that those folks have for both insuring ... sorry, I'm like staring
at your phone lying on the table here. I'm gesturing towards your smartphone ...
is both in setting up this connectivity and in getting help setting up private email
servers or, "Oh no, I dropped my phone in the toilet while I was checking my
email while I was going to the bathroom and my tech person who I contract
with can stand in line at Verizon or at the Apple store and set that up for me,"
right? That kind of privilege is much different than the kinds of constraints that
low wage workers are dealing with even though they have the same demands to
be connected to their work places, right?

Julia Ticona: So while the independent lawyer has like somebody to basically hand their
phone to and say, "Help, I broke this," the folks who are holding down like two
or three retail jobs and who might be like shoveling snow on the weekends to
kind of make extra money also have those similar demands to be connected to
all of their employees in order to manage all of this scheduling and shifting that
happens, all these different clients that they have. But when they drop their
phone in the toilet, they might not have the $250 just in their bank account that
they might need to get a new device right away. So, they're disconnected from
their income streams.

Speaker 1: Well, this really gets into the conversation of is this a utility and not really ...
mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julia Ticona: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah. Absolutely. There's-

Speaker 1: Is there any kind of solution for-

Julia Ticona: Oh, god.

Speaker 1: ... this disparity between [crosstalk 00:13:20]-

Julia Ticona: This is why I'm writing this book. I'm hoping that ... no, I shouldn't say that.
There are a lot of good people who are working on this problem. One of the
things that I want to ... I'm hoping to point out is ... you know, there's a lot of
talk about the digital divide in the United States. And there are a lot of different
non-profit organizations and even government kind of agencies, the FCC and
other places within the federal government who are dedicated to, I should say,
private companies who ... Comcast in Philadelphia is a big player in this, that are
trying to close the digital divide, right?

Julia Ticona: But one the things that I hope to show with the book is that this metaphor
doesn't really work to describe the empirical realities that I'm seeing. Because
what we see is actually not this digital divide necessarily, where there's this
whole group of people who just, for lack of funds, don't have access to these
essential technologies that they need. What I see is that people are re-budgeting their very limited income in order to build their own bridge across the digital divide. So, the way that I talk about it in the book is I say, instead of thinking about the digital divide as this kind of ... trying to build this bridge across this canyon or cliff, I always think about the Grand Canyon when I think about this. That a better way to think about it would be-

Speaker 1: That's a big cliff.

Julia Ticona: It's a big cliff, yeah. It's huge. And it's dangerous and you really don't want to fall in, right? Another way of thinking about it would be that people on one side of the digital divide are building a very rickety and substandard walking path with the tools that they have on hand, which are not that great. And the people on the other side of the divide, the people like you and me are basically saying, "Meh," right? Like, it's not really a political priority and it really requires the political will, I think, for those two sides to come together in order to get these big social problems fixed.

Speaker 1: You know, the other interesting thing to think about is kind of the status symbol of the phone. And I think there's something to be said for the fact that you often walk around and see people on either end of the spectrum of wage earning often carrying the same phone. So, it kind of gives ... optically it gives you the illusion that we're all sort of the same and experiencing the same thing, but not true.

Julia Ticona: Yeah. And one of the ways that we can see this is in the kind of starkest sense, is I always think about one of my interviewees, although this is repeated a bunch of times, she works at ... or, I believe she stills works there, works at this big national grocery retail chain and she is forbidden by that company's policy from having her phone on her at all while she's working-

Speaker 1: I can imagine that, yeah.

Julia Ticona: Yeah, so there's this very ... right? We take this for granted. It's seen as distracting, it's seen as inappropriate to be on your phone when you're on the clock or on the shift. And so, she has to figure out ways ... so, she has a little baby and so she has to figure out ways to hide her phone on her, so just in case anything happens when the kid, right?

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: That she can be contacted just in case. And she finds herself kind of sticking it in her bra or putting it in her inside pockets in different kinds of ways so that her manager can't see it while she's restocking shelves and things. And she's checking it in the bathroom when she has a chance for a bathroom break. And then you have people like me who ... or you, right? Like, we're doing our jobs right now, our technology is out and it's understandable that we're looking at it.
And it's just the ways that these technologies are sanctioned within our different work environments are completely different.

Julia Ticona: So, it might be that we have the same object. We have access to the same technology. But the way that technology is enrolled or embedded within our different social contexts means that the meaning of that device is completely different for those two sets of workers.

Speaker 1: Absolutely. And then you also just got a two and a half million dollar grant from the National Science Foundation-

Julia Ticona: Oh, jeez. Yes.

Speaker 1: ... for a collaborative study with Carnegie Mellon, Penn State, and West Virginia State. So, tell me a little bit about how that came to be. It seems like a pretty interdisciplinary project too.

Julia Ticona: Yes. Yeah, it is. So, yes, I should be very clear. This is a big collaborative grant. The UPenn part of it is myself and Chris Callison-Burch, who is faculty in the computer science department here in the engineering school. And Chris has been doing a lot of research on crowd workers. So, these are folks who find work through platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk, but also through kind of proprietary platforms that are inside particular businesses. So, like Facebook I believe has their own platform to source crowd work-

Speaker 1: Do they?

Julia Ticona: Yes. Yeah.

Speaker 1: Facebook Crowd Work, is that the platform name?

Julia Ticona: Yeah, I'm not sure what they call their crowd of workers, but ... and now I'm going to forget the-

Speaker 1: Advertisements coming to a sidewalk [crosstalk 00:19:01]-

Julia Ticona: Yeah, absolutely. Is it Bosch? I think Bosch is another ... right? Microsoft has their own, right?

Speaker 1: Oh.

Julia Ticona: And so, these are proprietary, they're not open to everybody, but people can kind of find this kind of remote work where you're doing this small tasks and often times they get quite skilled depending on how long you've been on the platform and how the particular platform is set up. But there are often these what are called micro tasks, so you're labeling images, you're classifying text,
you're sometimes maybe doing some elementary coding or design work in collaboration with design teams who are full time employees at these companies.

Julia Ticona: And he's been studying that kind of division of labor and how that work is set up, how tasks can be efficiently and accurately accomplished in those environments. That comes from his work in natural language processing. So, he's ... you can have him on your show. He can tell you all about his research. But he eventually got really interested in learning about like, who are these workers? Who are these people who are doing this work that was really essential for his own research. And how much are they getting paid? How can I help, right, in essence. Because his research and lots of other computer scientists depends on that kind of labor in order to advance the field, right? And so, these folks are actually really crucial parts of the academic labor force if you think about it.

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: So, he has been interested in a lot of different ways in figuring out ways to make that work better, ways to make that work more sustainable. And he invited to give a guest lecture in one of this classes on crowd working. And I talked about my current research project, which is not about the ways that gig workers use their cellphones, but is about other kinds of labor platforms. So, in this like much narrower sense of the gig economy, what we usually think about in like Uber and Lyft economy.

Julia Ticona: And after that, we just got in this great conversation about different ways to think about crowd workers on these platforms and how to think about improving that work. And I became a part of this huge grant project, which is a whole bunch of computer scientists and design folks and human computer interaction folks, who are all looking to intervene in these systems to build better things, build better working environments, and to help people who are interested in doing this kind of work actually up skill themselves. So, figure out ways to take those workers from doing image labeling or like very low paid elementary kind of tasks to doing more highly paid, more sustainable work in which they would have more autonomy and actually would be marketable outside of just these platforms. But would be marketable kind of to more traditional firms as well.

Speaker 1: Yeah, that's fantastic. I'm looking forward to seeing how that shapes up.

Julia Ticona: Me too. It's a new thing for me, which I'm really excited about. This is one of the great things about being at a place like Annenberg. I come from sociology, which is a very disciplined discipline, shall I say. And moving to a communication school has been a really exciting transition for me because it's allowed me to think about my research in this very broad way, where I get to think about like, how could I actually not only just study these workers, but also partner with
people who are thinking about intervening or improving these systems. And how do you actually do research with those kinds of aims. It just requires a whole kind of ... for me at least, it requires a whole kind of redefinition of what research is and what it can be, which has been really exciting.

Speaker 1: Do you rollerskate? Maybe that's my first question here.

Julia Ticona: God, no. No, absolutely not. No, I am a huge klutz. I don't even bike really because I'm very clumsy and I'm scared of getting hurt. So, I don't do a lot of fast moving things.

Speaker 1: Oh.

Julia Ticona: Yeah, [crosstalk 00:23:48]

Speaker 1: And you came from a small town, surely they had a roller rink.

Julia Ticona: Yes, we did have a roller rink. I used to rollerskate, or rollerblade. I think I was more of a blader.

Speaker 1: Oh.

Julia Ticona: Yeah. We'll put it that way.

Speaker 1: Sounds more sporty.

Julia Ticona: Sure, yeah. We'll pretend that that's a fact.

Speaker 1: Yeah. So, you can invite three people to dinner, living or dead. Who's coming?

Julia Ticona: Oh, my. That's such a good question. Off the top of my head: Frida Kahlo-

Speaker 1: Okay.

Julia Ticona: ... for sure. I'm going to think of like all people in the arts. Frida Kahlo, Studs Terkel, who's like a famous historian of work and of communicating people's everyday life experiences in really profound and wonderful ways. And my grandfather probably, who sort of sits at the intersection of those two people, I would say.

Julia Ticona: My grandpa was a lab tech in an animal research lab at a university close to the town where I grew up. He didn't have a PhD, didn't have an advanced degree, but was deeply interested in research and science in the pursuit of public good. In his case, ensuring animal welfare. And he later in life, became an artist because he retired as you used to be able to do in those days, and he realized that he had really not exercised that part of his brain, that part of his life,
expressed that part of himself. And he became super involved in the arts and just became this super prolific sculptor, painter, charcoal drawer, charcoal artist.

Julia Ticona: It was just amazing. I was a pretty little kid, but I remember just watching him make this transition and him trying to teach me to be more creative. That was like his mission in life, was to take his grandchildren, to really say, "Yes, it's really important to do academics. Yes, it's really important to do all of these scholarly serious things that your parents want you to do, but you also should really take the time to be a creative person."

Speaker 1: That sound Silicon Valley Bush discovers painting.

Julia Ticona: Yeah, sure. Yes. And he bought me my first musical instrument. So, I played the cello pretty seriously when I was a kid, not so much anymore, but I deeply miss and it's something that I always think about. And was always trying to get us to draw and to just loosen up and to be creative in our lives.

Julia Ticona: So, I would love for him, and also I would just love to be able to see him again. So, that would be a very selfish reason. But to seem him in conversation with those two other people, who I deeply admire for other reasons would be really fun.

Speaker 1: Great. Do you have any odd hobbies?

Julia Ticona: Odd hobbies? Well, I'm a second year tenure track junior faculty member, so I officially have no hobbies. That's my answer to that. The hobby that I do have is I started a garden this year at my ... I have a house in Philadelphia, which is very cool. And we don't have any yard or anything like that, but I do have two big containers where I have some vegetables growing. And I have gardened a little bit in the past. But I think now because I have ... maybe because I have a kid, and I care a lot about him knowing how things grow and being able to see how cool it is to be able to grow something and then eat it, but I just think that that's a really neat thing.

Julia Ticona: But I've been really into the gardens, honestly. It's very relaxing to me. And it's also something I can kind of do whenever, which is cool.

Speaker 1: That's great.

Julia Ticona: Just go out there and like prune the plants, it's very zen, which is something I need a lot in my life right now.

Speaker 1: Have you gotten around to the arboretum yet?

Julia Ticona: I haven't. I should really go, huh?
Speaker 1: [crosstalk 00:28:14] do that.

Julia Ticona: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Do you cook?

Julia Ticona: I do. I cook very frequently. My husband and I actually have kind of a ... we're sort of competitive people, if only with each other, and we alternate weeks cooking. So, everybody has a week where they just don't have to know what's going on or care of procure the groceries or do any of that stuff. And so, every week, we have a low key, "Oh, see what a good job I did this week? You should step it up next week," kind of thing going on.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Julia Ticona: And I, of course, think that I win every week, because I think I'm a great cook. But yes, we do cook a lot.

Speaker 1: When you really just need a burst of energy, what song do you listen?

Julia Ticona: Oh, god. Like, Beyonce's we Run the World (Girls). I went to an all women's school, and that was like my anthem. So, it's a lot of that.

Speaker 1: Do you have any weird office quirks or like things that you keep around on your desk or snacks that you have?

Julia Ticona: I have a lot of snacks in my office, yes. I feel very deeply about always having food around me. I have granola bars, nuts. I have a lot of like squirrely things, like I always [inaudible 00:29:38], maybe it's also because they're kind of hidden in my drawers. They're not just kind of out in my office. What else do I have in my office?

Julia Ticona: I also have just pictures. I have a lot of pictures in my office. Pictures of my former colleagues at my last job. We were a really tight knit team. So, I have some pictures of us over my desk where I'm working on my computer, so I can remember what a great experience that was and that I should call them more often. And pictures of just some like academic idols and my family and some friends and things like that, I like to keep that kind of stuff around.

Julia Ticona: I think it humanizes the work space. And it reminds me of what I'm doing all this for and to keep my own stress in context, I feel like. Yeah.

Speaker 1: When did you first get your own phone, cellphone?

Julia Ticona: Oh, I got my first cellphone when I was a senior in high school. And it because I was driving. So, driving and phones were very tightly connected in my town
because we ... I grew up in upstate New York, so it's also a part of the snow belt. So, we get feet and feet and feet and feet of snow every single year. Sometimes all at once. And so, having ... it was more of an emergency thing and a safety thing. And also, that I was sort of venturing out on my own as a young women, not in public, but just like ti maybe parties that I shouldn't have been at and my parents wanted to make sure that I had a way to get in touch with them I think, if I ever needed to be rescued from the situation-

Speaker 1: Assuming you had cell service.

Julia Ticona: Yes, exactly. Yeah, that's true. That's true, and in a lot of the rural areas where we were having the parties, there was probably not cell service.

Speaker 1: Yeah. What are you reading right now?

Julia Ticona: Oh, I am reading ... I just started yesterday, so I'm reading all this stuff for my grad and undergrad classes that I'm teaching. Which I have, of course, all read before. I assigned it. But I'm reading a new book by this woman, I actually don't know who this person is. This book was ... it just kind of came up. I think it may have been recommended on Amazon or something even. That recommendation algorithm on Amazon in amazing.

Speaker 1: Oh, AI at work.

Julia Ticona: Yes. Highly, highly refined and maybe because I look at books all the time on Amazon, it like targets me very accurately. This book from the University of Chicago Press is called The Seductions of Quantification by Sally Merry. I should probably write this person and email because I think this book is absolutely brilliant. And it's about the ways that indicators, all of these different organizations are creating these qualitative indicators to measure violence against women in different countries. And she's contrasting that with the way that domestic violence research is often done in a more local context, which is in this very qualitative, on the ground sense.

Julia Ticona: And she's kind of putting these two systems of knowledge up against each other and showing how they've kind of fought it out in the world of governance and it is adjacent to my research obviously in thinking about data and meaning and accountability and things like that. But it's just different enough that it's really giving me this very cool sense of how scholars and other fields are thinking about data and culture and meaning.

Speaker 1: Wow. What is your favorite place to be on campus?

Julia Ticona: Oh, that's a great question. So, when I interviewed here, which is still, of course it was only a few years ago, it's like very fresh in my mind. On my tour, I was taken to the ... is it the art library? The beautiful red library?
Julia Ticona: With that amazing room that was very dimly, romantically lit and all these students that were like doing really important work. And I thought to myself, "I will be here once a week at least." And I have not set foot-

Speaker 1: Have you not?

Julia Ticona: ... in that room since I got here, which is an absolute shame.

Speaker 1: [crosstalk 00:33:55]

Julia Ticona: But I am actually really enjoying my office. I feel like I've made it a very comfortable space, so I actually kind of like being in there. And my classrooms, actually are great at Annenberg, and I get so fired about research when I'm teaching that I have very positive associations with the classrooms that I teach in. I feel like because of that fact.

Speaker 1: Cool. I think I know how you might answer this one, but I'll ask it anyway. If you could choose between the superpowers of reading minds, being invisible, or flying, which would you choose?

Julia Ticona: Oh, god. You know, so, reading minds is like obvious, right? For an interviewer. I'm like, all I do all day ... or not all day, all I would love to do all day is to just get people to tell me what they're thinking.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Julia Ticona: But you know, I think there is something really crucial to my epistemology about the world and about why what I study is important that when people actually have to articulate to you what's going on in their heads, that that's actually a really important process-

Speaker 1: It says something different, yeah.

Julia Ticona: Yeah. And I'm not sure that knowing unfiltered what was going on would be helpful.

Speaker 1: Yeah.

Julia Ticona: Or even ethical as a researcher, right? So, I think if I had to write an IRB for myself, knowing that I could read people's minds, that I wouldn't allow myself to
do the research that I do because I think it would be kind of unethical for me to do that. So, not that, because then maybe I wouldn't be able to do what I do anymore, which would be very sad.

Speaker 1: Plot twist.

Julia Ticona: Yeah. Being invisible would be kind of interesting because I often feel very out of place in some of the settings that I find myself every day, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing. Not in terms of research, I wouldn't want to be invisible in my research because I enjoy doing that. And being a part of kind of different scenes and experiencing the world with another person and having them show me around. Maybe actually flying.

Speaker 1: Wow.

Julia Ticona: Yeah, which I wouldn't have expected to say, but now talking myself out of the other two, I think-

Speaker 1: Yeah, you really did.

Julia Ticona: ... that would be kind of cool. I think that would be really neat. And would lower my carbon footprint, which would be great.

Speaker 1: There you go. Good answer. What do you think is an overrated virtue?

Julia Ticona: Oh, an overrated virtue? Wow. That's a great question. I would say confidence.

Speaker 1: Hm, [crosstalk 00:36:56]

Julia Ticona: I have found, and this is a journey that I'm still on as a junior faculty, especially female faculty, but something that I had to learn as a graduate student and I'm still working on learning, is to not take other people's confidence at face value, or to let that make me feel a certain way about myself. Because I very rarely feel confident about, especially as a scientist, about making grandiose statements about the world and things that must be true.

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: And so, when I encounter people who are like that, I find it a little off putting, honestly. And I have to tell myself to read this encounter as an ethnographer would, right?

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: To kind of be like, "Wow, what's going on with this person? And I'm really interested to hear more about what makes them sure about what they're saying
and that they are the person to be saying it," right? And maybe I should learn a
little bit from that, but also just kind of be a little bit critical of where that
confidence is coming from. So, I think if people were a little ... not all the people,
some of the people need more confidence.

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: Some of my graduate students could use more confidence in what they’re
saying because they actually do have a lot of authority and it takes some time to
develop that voice and that authority. I say that as somebody who's living that
truth. But on the other end, I think there are some people who could use a little
less confidence.

Speaker 1: Yeah. And last question, what gives you hope? And you can interpret that
however you would like.

Julia Ticona: Is it really cliché to say my kid?

Speaker 1: No.

Julia Ticona: It might be, but I don't care. Yeah, my kid.

Speaker 1: It's a common answer, but I think there's a good reason for it.

Julia Ticona: Yeah? Yeah, just seeing ... and I shouldn't just say my kid, but being immersed in
the world of kids makes me very hopeful. And I don't just mean tiny little baby
kids, which I'm also immersed in right now, but also teaching undergraduates,
which is something I'm doing for the first time this semester at Penn. I have
been shocked, although shouldn't be. But also, it makes me very hopeful that a
lot of the common teachable moments that I have engineered into my class in
years past ... so, I'm teaching a class on digital inequality right now at the
undergrad level.

Julia Ticona: And in previous years when I've taught these readings or versions of these
readings, where we're reading something really utopian about digital
technologies being the answer to all of society's problems and they're the great
equalizer and they're democratizing. And you know, usually when we read these
readings, students are like, "Wow, this is really exciting." They're hopeful about
these authors who are saying these really utopian things. And then, I have them
read something really critical or like read a case study where predictive policing
is discriminating against people. And then, they have this kind of shift in their
perspective.

Julia Ticona: I don't need to do the second part anymore, is what I'm finding. And I don't
know if it's just a moment right now, or if that these particular students who are
of ... and again, I have lots of different ages in the classroom, but who have lived
with these technologies for a certain amount of time at this point, the critique is
already there in their own experiences of these things. And that actually makes me very hopeful, even though it can be kind of a ... it can feel like kind of a downer in the classroom, right?

Speaker 1: Right.

Julia Ticona: I think seeing that kind of critical impulse in them makes me really hopeful as somebody who wants these systems to be better, but also thinks that the best way to make them better is to kind of use them with this critical impulse, or use them with this critical eye. And I just think about my kid growing up in that kind of world, where these kinds of technologies are not just taken for granted as being progressive and good. And that actually makes me really happy. That gives me a lot of hope about our ability to change these systems and to make them more equitable.

Speaker 1: This podcast is a production of the Office of University Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. We hope you’ll join us again soon for another session of Office Hours.