Project Title: Protecting the Future of Children’s Online Identities  
Mentor: Sarita Schoenebeck, PhD

Project Description
As millions of parents and extended familial and social networks are increasingly sharing information about children online, a new era of children’s rights concerns is emerging. For the first time in history, children are growing up with an online identity that was established without their permission, often starting before they are even born. Information shared about children online—beginning with their sonogram picture in utero or even the fertility journey before that—is stored permanently and persistently on sites like Instagram or Facebook. Furthermore, applications like Timehop and Facebook’s “On this Day” (which resurface users’ prior content from earlier years) have introduced a new and rapidly growing genre of technologies around personal archiving and reminiscence. As families live out their social lives online, protecting children’s personal information online has become both important and challenging. While technological advancements encourage sharing personal information to broad audiences online, they typically do not consider what parents share about their children from an early age, and how children should take control over their own online identities as they grow up. The goal of this research project is to investigate the role that technologies can play in supporting families to make 1) preservation and access decisions around children’s online identities, and 2) children taking control over their own online identities as they grow up.

Student Role
The student will work as a research assistant on this project and can participate in various parts of this project depending on interests.

One possible activity is to assess data management practices and policies among technology companies that collect and store information about children (directly, as in Mattel’s Barbie and Teddy the Guardian, as well as indirectly, as in parents who share information about children on Instagram). To do this, the student will research methods for assessing data management practices from archives and records management scholarship and develop a set of metrics for assessment, including who owns the data (e.g., Instagram users own their photos), deletion policies and features (i.e., how easy it is to delete content), shared content or transfer of content (e.g., shared account features that enable joint ownership of content), responsibility for preserving data, and publicness of data (e.g., Twitter giving tweets to Library of Congress). This stage of the project will produce a scholarly article reflecting social media’s policies around managing personal information with recommendations for improvement based on archives literature.

A second possible activity is to investigate the design space for enabling families to make thoughtful and reflective preservation, access, and control decisions about children’s online
identities. Specifically, the student will explore how to translate best practices from archive and records management literature to user experience designs in social media platforms. For example, this could involve designing a Facebook application that enables families to make decisions about how long information about a child should be preserved, who should have access to it, and whether the child should take control of it in the future. One approach for doing this would be to conduct design sessions with parents and children where they are invited to brainstorm design ideas using online platforms they use regularly (e.g., Facebook, Google, Snapchat, YouTube, etc.), and to envision and sketch how they would want that platform to manage their records. This might include questions like who should manage this content? How might children take control over the content when they grow up? What do parents wish was stored of them from their childhood? It could also explore future possibilities: what are reactions to facial recognition technology? What about voice recognition which might preserve valuable oral records (e.g., a child’s first word or parents’ marriage proposal)? This stage of the project will produce a variety of artifacts such as sketches, design ideas, and prototypes that will be incorporated into future development, evaluation, and publication of social media prototypes.

Contribution to Student Academic and Professional Development

The student will gain experience in a variety of scholarly and methodological domains depending on focus. In terms of scholarly areas, this might include archives, information policy, social media theories, family studies, social computing, user experience, and human-computer interaction. In terms of methods, this might include policy analysis, interviews, participatory design, log file analysis, prototyping, or design. All aspects of work will be conducted with the goal of contributing to academic scholarship in the form of a publication in a top journal or conference venue.

In addition to the above primary project, the student will also have the opportunity to work on a secondary project, if interested, that involves working closely with a current UMSI PhD student in the areas of either (1) how to manage and reduce harassment in online contexts or (2) peer-to-peer buying and selling groups online (e.g., Mom for sale groups on Facebook).

Mentoring Plan

I will meet with the student weekly and more often if needed. The first step, possibly before the student even arrives, will be to scope out an appropriate and productive 12-week project plan including goals, milestones, and deliverables. This will likely begin with going through the UM Institutional Review Board process for conducting ethical research. As I do with all of my advisees, I will take active intellectual engagement and interest in the student’s research in all aspects of the project. I will also seek to connect the student with an existing UMSI PhD student for additional mentoring.