DLi @ CORNELL TECH

Digital Life Initiative

Date

Thurs 28 March

Time

12.30pm - 1.45pm
Includes a light lunch

Venue

Room 165 | Bloomberg Center
Cornell Tech | Roosevelt Island

Speaker

Isabelle Zaugg

Institute for Comparative Literature and Society, Columbia University

Title

Precarity and hope for digitally-disadvantaged languages (and their scripts)

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Digital Life
Seminar Series
Spring 2019

Biography

Isabelle Zaugg's research interests revolve around language & culture, media, and digital technologies in the global public sphere. Her dissertation entitled "Digitizing Ethiopic: Coding for Linguistic Continuity in the Face of Digital Extinction" investigates the relationship between digitally-disadvantaged languages and patterns of mass extinction of language diversity. Zaugg earned a PhD in Communication from American University in Washington, D.C. in 2017. She earned an MA in Film & Video from American University in 2013 and a BA in Art Semiotics from Brown University in 2006. She was a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellow to Ethiopia in 2016-2017 and a Fulbright Student Fellow to Ethiopia in 2012-2013, teaching a filmmaking course to students at Addis Ababa University. She began her scholarly engagement with Ethiopia as a study-abroad student at Addis Ababa University in 2004-2005. She is currently a Mellon-Sawyer Seminar Postdoctoral Fellow in "Global Language Justice" at the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society at Columbia University. She's an alumna of the United World College of the Adriatic, and was born and raised in the San Luis Valley of Southern Colorado.

Abstract

Minority and indigenous languages and scripts currently face unprecedented rates of extinction, and digital technologies appear to be contributing to their decline. Scholars predict 50-90% of languages will become extinct this century, while only 5% of languages will attain digital vitality. The lack of basic digital supports like Unicode encoding, fonts, or keyboards make using digitally-disadvantaged languages on digital devices inconvenient or impossible. Language communities see declines in the use of their language and/or script as people turn to better-supported languages like English, or transliterate their own language into the Latin alphabet, when using devices. Identity and ways of knowing are embedded within languages and scripts, and so their loss impacts both the most vulnerable communities globally as well as humankind as a whole. While digital support for language diversity is increasing, will it be too little too late? This presentation investigates what can be done to close this digital divide through an instrumental case study of Unicode inclusion and the development of supports for the Ethiopic script and its languages, including Ethiopia's national language, Amharic. This presentation concludes with recommendations to strengthen support for digitally-disadvantaged languages and scripts, from inclusion in Unicode, to grassroots coding within and on behalf of digitally-disadvantaged language communities, to advancing the idea that supporting linguistic diversity is Silicon Valley's corporate social responsibility.