

TNW's Linda Mertens on mental health, the role of creatives and top 2018 trends

By [Juanita Pienaar](#)

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The most recent Creative Mornings talk took place on Thursday, 30 November and featured Linda Mertens from The Next Web (TNW) where she spoke about her initiative, Normaal Gesproken, a project focused on creating an inclusive conversation about mental health.



Linda Mertens, program manager at The Next Web. Image provided.

I caught up with Mertens, who is based in Amsterdam, and asked her to elaborate a bit more on the themes discussed in her talk, what her job at TNW entails and how she thinks South Africa stacks up in terms of technology and creative ability when it comes to the rest of the world.

❏ **Can you please tell us more about The Next Web and what your job there entails?**

The Next Web is a media and events company with a focus on technology and entrepreneurship. It started in Amsterdam in 2006 with a meet-up for 300 tech-savvy entrepreneurs from the local scene. Fast forward 12 years later and our blog reaches 10+ million readers per month, we founded a Tech Hub (TQ) together with Google for Entrepreneurs, and we organise one of the world's largest festivals on the future of technology, business, and creativity. At TNW, I'm part of the events team and responsible for programming TNW Conference and TNW New York. Throughout the year I research emerging technologies, the way they'll impact our lives and businesses tomorrow and beyond, trends and who's doing innovative stuff in the tech and creative industries. Thanks to that I get to interact with and meet the brightest minds and most inspiring people out there.



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❏ **Please take us through some of the key thoughts you shared during your talk at Creative Mornings.**

As this month's theme was Death, my Creative Mornings talk didn't have anything to do with TNW but regarded my own initiative: Normaal Gesproken, translated to Generally Speaking. It's born out of my Master's graduation project and out of the desire to create a more open, educated and inclusive conversation about mental health. Some key thoughts I

hope the audience walked away with:

- Everything in life has a counterpart. Without darkness, there is no light. We can't always be happy, be fine. Sometimes we're sad and that's okay. Don't let your thoughts or emotions take the steering wheel, accept them as they are and they will come and go.
- Depression is no sign of weakness, and one mustn't be ashamed of having this disease. Open up the dialogue with your loved ones about what goes through your mind when you're in a darker period. Making mine part of the experience and journey of getting better definitely helped me feel less lonely during my depressions and after many years, I've started to recognise their unconditional love. It's super scary to let people in but eventually, this is the thing that will save your life.
- Self-medication through alcohol and drugs is not a sustainable solution. For me, it doesn't work to live a celibate life either. Together with my therapist I found a way to have a healthier relationship with alcohol and stopped using it as an escape. A hangover makes it a lot more difficult to fight the voices in your head, and it's really not worth it.
- Don't forget a picture is just a fraction of reality. Social media is the showreel of other people's highlights, no wonder we feel overwhelmed by what we see on our social feed and think their lives are so much more awesome than our own. Unlearn yourself to compare your life to others.
- If someone you know is depressed or burned-out, don't try to cheer them up. This might sound weird but just don't. Listen, have empathy for their sadness. Don't talk about all the things that should make them happy (loving family, good job, healthy relationship, supporting friends) because it only emphasises how "weird" they are for being depressed.
- Have you been feeling down, low in energy, or an intense loneliness for a while? Share these thoughts with a friend and perhaps, step into the doctor's office and ask to be referred to a psychologist. They won't judge, that's kind of their whole thing.



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Juanita Pienaar 5 Jul 2017



🎯 **What role do creatives play in this ever-evolving technological world and its future?**

Without creativity, there would be no ever-evolving technological world. It all starts with an idea and for that, you need inspiration and creativity. It's important to sometimes step out of your routine, out of your comfort zone, Hence why I'm in Cape Town at the moment. New experiences, different cultures and conversations with people I've just met, are the fuel for my best ideas. But also, taking it slow. When you're always in a rush to check the next box, your brain will never have time to rest and the conscious and unconscious parts won't meet. That's where the Eureka happens. I think we got this far as humans thanks to our curiosity, our hunger to discover, learn and share stories. That to me is creativity.

■ **You attended the Cannes Lions Festival this year. What was the experience like for you and do you mind sharing some insights from the Festival with our readers?**

It was a very overwhelming experience. I go there as part of RA*W for Advertisers, an initiative that promotes on-the-job learning and seeks to empower advertising professionals at the beginning of their careers. I'm a board member there at the moment. We travel to the French Riviera with a group of 30 juniors from the Dutch advertising scene. As it's very difficult to get (financial) support from your agency to go to Cannes, we help them get the budget and the time away from their desks. I think the struggle to go there in your early years is ridiculous but let's save that for a different conversation. Some of my insights.



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14 Nov 2017



For me, it was super inspiring to see what this industry is doing with the technologies we research, cover and programme at TNW as well. I would describe it as applied technology. I love it. It shows me the concrete, creative examples of something that to me also feels very abstract and somewhere far away from reality. One thing I missed in Cannes was any coverage on sustainability. The footprint of this event is immense, so much consumption at sponsored beaches and yet, no talk was programmed about anything related to sustainability. Hopefully, we'll see more of that in 2018 because although it's more popular to talk about diversity and AI, we shouldn't forget to take care of Mother Earth. That and brands are super into chatbots.

■ **What are the key technological and innovative trends you can identify for 2018, specifically focussed around creative industries?**

There are two technological innovations dominating most of my professional conversations: Blockchain and AI. Some might call them buzzwords and I'm sure they are, hence why it's so important to fully understand the way they work and their implementations. Both are very applicable for creatives, you see it already happening. Musicians writing songs together with AI, or distributing a new album via Blockchain technology. The latter one enables an artist to keep more money from the actual sales in comparison to using a music publisher.

Creative industries by nature thrive on collaboration and I think now is an amazing time to work as a creative and explore how far you can go working (together) with technologies. I'm really looking forward to seeing where AR and VR are going to take us in terms of immersive storytelling. The physical body and imaginative experience are no longer connected and that is very exciting.

■ **You are currently based in Amsterdam. How do you think South Africa compares in terms of technology and creative ability when it comes to the rest of the world?**

The rest of the world is a very big place and I surely haven't experienced all of it, so that's a difficult thing to say. What I see happening in Cape Town is amazing though. They don't call it Silicon Cape for nothing, there's so much entrepreneurial spirit and positive energy vibrating through this city. The open-minded, warm culture of South Africa makes it a very welcoming community for me to interact with. There's a huge need to disrupt the way things have been going for many years. Let's be honest, this country has a few issues to solve. For example, the educational system and equal opportunities for South Africans from various backgrounds. Luckily, there are some very bright and devoted people working on that.



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Access to higher education urgently needs to be decentralised for South-Africa to grow and flourish, at least I think so. A lot of the current problems come from a lack of information and education to the masses. You see solutions coming from the bottom-up and I hope the next few years will show us just how good it can get when we start including everyone in the conversation.

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ABOUT JUANITA PIENAAR

Juanita is the editor of the marketing & media portal on the Bizcommunity website. She is also a contributing writer.

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