

Telling stories about purpose-led design

 By Leigh Andrews

15 Dec 2017

To many 'Design Indaba' is simply founder Ravi Naidoo, but there's a huge team behind the scenes. Meet Neo Maditla, Design Indaba's new editor-in-chief. With her hard-news background and passion for purpose-led design, she's the tough cookie looking to make the Design Indaba website as popular as its annual Festival...



Maditla is relishing her new role as Design Indaba editor-in-chief.

There's a calm buzz about Maditla: She's soft-spoken but sure of herself, carefully picking her words, greeting everyone who crosses her path and asking as many questions as she answers.

That's par for the course for someone in the media, but unsurprising as in the past month alone, Maditla has travelled to the Netherlands as part of Design Indaba's partnership with Dutch Design Week, is on the [Rise Art Prize](#) panel for Africa and the Middle East, and recently got back from a content-gathering trip to Tanzania and Rwanda – quite the coup with just six months on the job. But her career is extensive across broadcast, print and online media.

Asked about her career highlights so far – over hake and chips and mint tea for her flu at Maria's – she said it was hard to pick just one. Maria's is the perfect spot for people-watching, something Neo says enjoys doing.

“ Not a fan of selfies, Maditla says friends call her a lurker, as she'd rather take photos of the flowers and the food or get another angle of the vase than one of herself. ”

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📷📷📷📷📷📷 A post shared by neo maditla (@_maditla) on Oct 27, 2017 at 10:13am PDT

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Maditla adds that you can even identify a place by an object. She adds that she loves people-watching as people are so free in the outdoors and it feels so good to disappear from the ever-watchful level of disturbance like on social media.

She's enjoying rediscovering Cape Town and explains how she made the bold move of going freelance from her role as a reporter at the *Cape Argus*, also shifting geographical location from Cape Town to Joburg to further push her boundaries and be closer to her family in Mabopane, North of Pretoria.

The short Joburg stint allowed her to explore other aspects of writing like scriptwriting on the *Late Nite News with Loyiso Gola (LNN)*, which garnered an Emmy nomination. Of that accolade, Maditla says she and the LNN writing team truly felt affirmed. As a journalist, you think that's all you can do, so it's a confidence booster when you try something different and it works out.



Out and about in Cape Town.

She's also vocal about the need for better mentorship of young people. After LNN she mentored young content producers at Livity Africa's online youth platform *LivemagSA*.

“ She’s seen first-hand just how little support is offered on entering employment and some of the problems newbies encounter actually have nothing to do with talent but just about getting that Converse-sneakered foot into the industry. ”

One of the most fulfilling parts of her role as a mentor was actually using her media contacts to help talented young writers to get a foot in the door while also helping to diversify the writing pools from which publishers can pick young talent.

Behind the scenes with team Design Indaba

Explaining how she landed the plum role, Maditla says there was an opening for online editor, then she received an email from Design Indaba and the rest is history.

“ That was around May, and the biggest learning curve, since accepting the job, has been shifting from a mindset of always mentoring people to one of working in a dynamic team as equals. ”

That said, Maditla points out that people know the Design Indaba festival and conference as design and creativity leadership, not necessarily the website. Part of her job is to help grow the website to stand tall against the best in the world.



Design Indaba editor-in-chief Neo Maditla, in the role since June this year, with content producer Lindsay Samson on a recent trip to Kigali.



Design Indaba deputy editor, Jamie Matroos; content producer, Lindsay Samson; and social media manager, Jehan Latief.

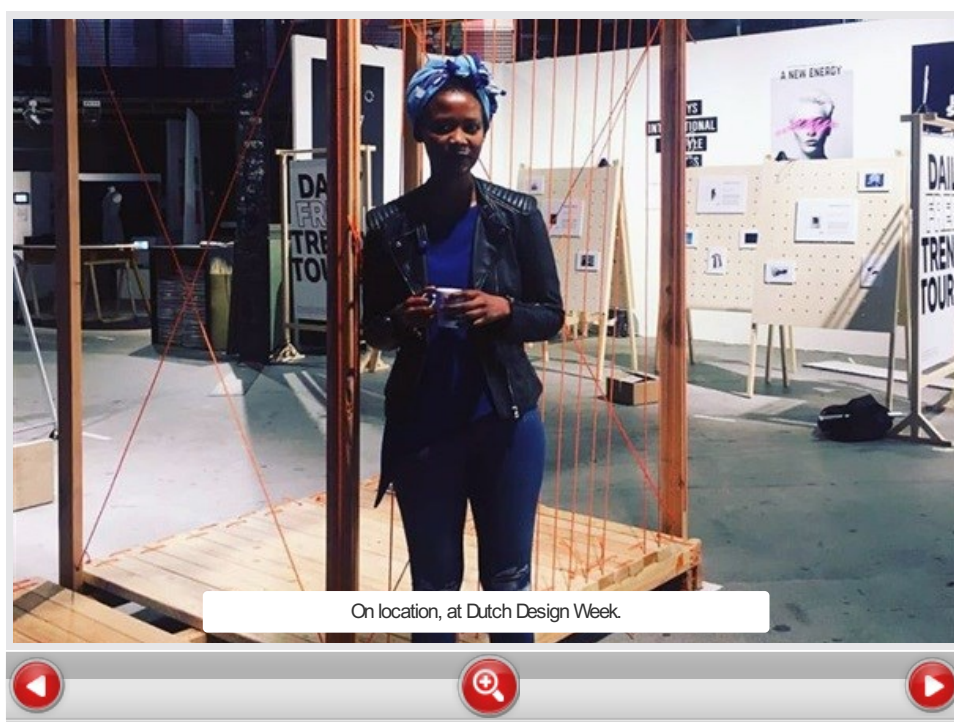
Maditla says that part of her work is actually getting the audience – that may not be into design – to understand that design is about more than just a beautiful object. The Design Indaba website is a place where one finds projects and people who

are using their creativity to change the world for the better.

How she and the team have been trying to do that is through storytelling and looking at the people behind these beautiful objects as well as what drives them. The different aspects of design all hold betterment of people in mind.

“ Good design takes something that was a blind spot, something you deal with every day and makes it better. ”

Maditla loves working with this team where she's no longer 'the old one'. They're feisty and ambitious and just want to do things, which Maditla says is “so cool,” and she feeds off of their energy. They want to figure things out and make things better, which is why she is part of the rare bunch that looks forward to going to work.



Her recent trip to the Netherlands for [Antenna](#), which formed part of Dutch Design Week, was an example of how her passion for storytelling, design and youth mentorship tied together. For the first few months, the team curated projects from universities, which were whittled down to a top 20 with amazing projects. After all their Skype chats she says she felt like she knew them even before they got to meet on the other side of the world.

The current design space: New people, new things

Maditla was excited to see many inventing new sections of design that didn't exist before, like drone costume design. She shares that it's important to go beyond making beautiful things but to also leave the world a little better than how you found it.

Maditla shares:

“ Everywhere I go, there are so many young people doing incredible newthings. When we Google someone and nothing comes up, that's what sparks our excitement. It's actually a newchallenge in the office – if you do a Google Search and nothing comes up on that person, you're onto something! ”

Maditla says the team aims to integrate more of the website into the festival which involves doing a lot of pre-festival content to help the audience get to know next year's speakers like Lebo Mashile, Sunu Gonera and Morag Myerscough.



First speaker for Design Indaba Festival 2018 announced

1 Nov 2017



Sunu Gonera announced as speaker at Design Indaba 2018

14 Nov 2017



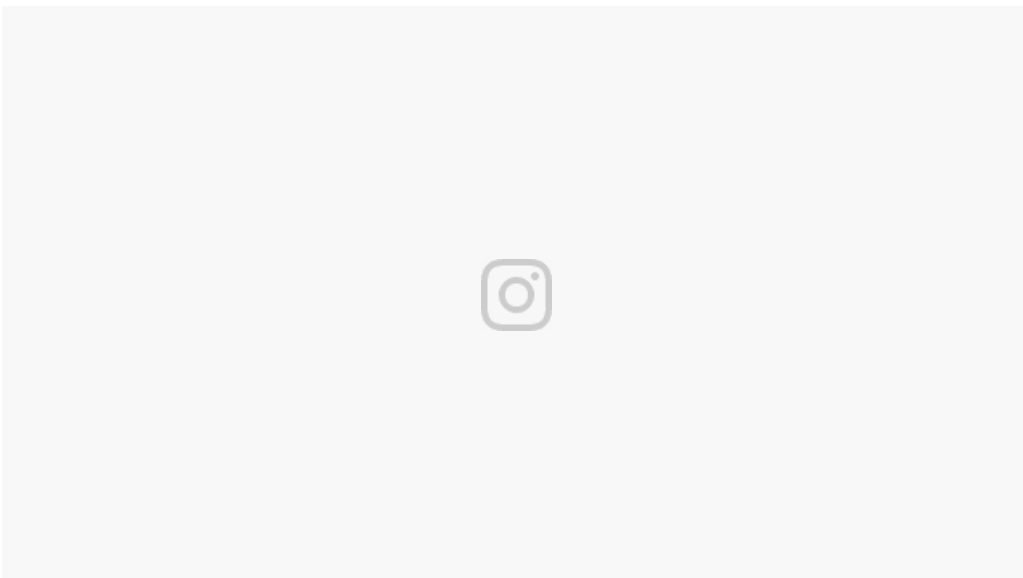
Lebo Mashile announced as Design Indaba 2018 speaker

Lindsay Samson 21 Nov 2017



A lot of people see Design Indaba as the festival itself, a four-day physical event held annually. Her challenge is to connect that the other 362 days of the year and get people excited about creativity all year around through good content.

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It's an unparalleled experience of creativity in all its forms. Design Indaba Festival is happening 21 - 23 February 2018, but now's the time to get those tickets. Discounted EARLY BIRD tickets are still available; link in our bio. // #designindaba #festival #creativity #design #experience

A post shared by Design Indaba (@designindaba) on Nov 17, 2017 at 5:41am PST

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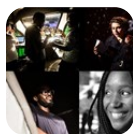
Social media's a crucial aspect of digital success, and Maditla says just a few weeks ago, their social media following grew by about the same amount in a month as it usually does during the festival time. This means that the small tweaks that she and the team have been making to the content are starting to bear fruit.

“ Even the angles they take are worlds apart – sure, it's beautiful, but how is it making a difference? There are so many design publications out there, so what differentiates Design Indaba's website? ”

Maditla says as much as possible, they write about the people designing the things and how those objects are creating a better world through creativity.

Sourcing stories from social media

Sharing a sneak preview of what we can expect from the Design Indaba Festival 2018, Maditla says this will be her first time experiencing it away from the journalistic beat, which she is really excited about.



Early-bird ticket sales now open for Design Indaba Festival 2018

3 Nov 2017



She still feels the rush of 'the scoop' but certainly doesn't miss the breaking news calls in the middle of the night. I can't help but agree with her that newspapers are a toxic space of competition.

“ *Design Indaba is nothing like a news room where the idea is 'chum chum chum' though. They want deeper storytelling whether on video or quirky interviews. She says she is also building a team, mentoring a few interns, and hopefully helping them to find their own voices as writers or content producers.* ”

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Architecture meets art, while emotion meets innovation in the work of @studio_swine, who will be joining us at Design Indaba Conference 2018 // Their recent project New Spring explores the fragility of the seasons. The experiential installation was created using unusual materials, like recycled aluminium. Read more about the duo on designindaba.com // Production: #studioswine; Director: Juriaan Booij; DOP: Edgar Dubrovskiy; Editor: Jamie O'Donnell // #designindaba Conference will be taking place between 21 - 23 Feb 2018 and Early Bird tickets are still available; link in our bio. // #newspring #cos #creativity #sustainabledesign #film #art

A post shared by Design Indaba (@designindaba) on Nov 27, 2017 at 5:41am PST

At the end of the day, it's all about curating an excellent mix of content and stories that speak to a diverse group of

people and not just designers. There are so many stories out there that it's easy to start experiencing anxiety over covering it all. But Maditla says to take a step back and look for the human value – look for the value you can add and where you can collaborate. See the gaps, meet your peers, and make the circle bigger.



Design Indaba Conference, a multi-sensory event

23 Nov 2017



Design Indaba really is multifaceted. There's the website, as well as the smaller projects they focus on throughout the year, which need their own content to run, and of course the tie-ins with the festival conference. So it's not a struggle for content, it's more about finding their voice. Many people now approach the team with leads instead of them having to track people down – the young ones are so good at finding those on Instagram and Facebook, says Maditla.

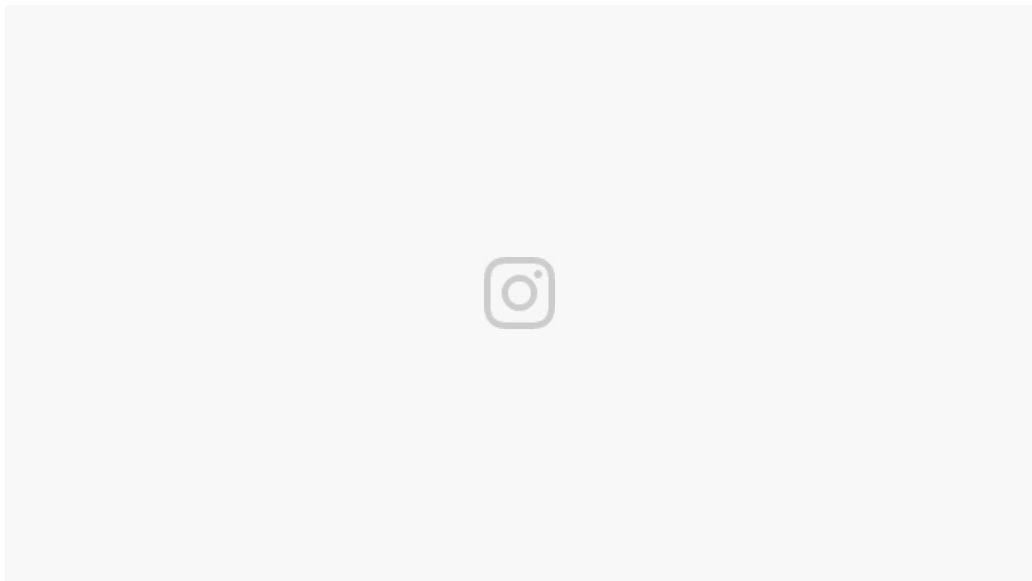
Design Indaba 2018 and beyond...

Speaking of future plans then, Maditla points out that the Design Indaba Festival is known as the best design festival in the world, so there's no reason the website shouldn't be on par. She acknowledges it's not just about the numbers, though.

“ If you want to find and design for change, and changing world for better, you need to be that place. ”

Maditla says the team is chiselling away and working towards that.

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It's more than a conference; it's more than a music festival. It's the annual do-tank at the intersection of innovation, business and social impact design. Above all, it's an experience. Design Indaba Festival is happening between 21 - 24 February 2018 @artscapetheatre. Early bird tickets are still available; link in our bio. // #designindaba #nightscape #creativity #design #abetterworldthroughcreativity #capetown A post shared by Design Indaba (@designindaba) on Dec 2, 2017 at 9:46am PST

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On the African continent alone there is so much going on in the 54 individual countries so the team travel as much as they can to find out what other creatives are doing. For example, on a recent trip to Egypt and Morocco, deputy editor Jamie-Lee Matroos was blown away by the projects taking place in Cairo, as well as in Morocco by young designers, urban planners and stock-motion animators.



Team outing in Woodstock: Maditla with content producer, Lindsay Samson; content producer/graphic designer, Ernie Uys; and deputy editor, Jamie-Lee Matroos.

That's the Design Indaba lens – we can all cover the big stories as the river is flowing, but we don't all need to flow in the same direction. Part of the work ahead for Maditla will lie in differentiating what they do, and in embracing the stories they uncover with the same confidence as the Design Indaba festival, which has made a name for itself simply because it does things differently.

Sounds like they're off to a riveting start – I can't wait to see what Maditla brings to the overall Design Indaba experience, from a content perspective. Keep an eye on our [Design Indaba special section](#) and check in with the Design Indaba team on their [website](#) and weekly [newsletter](#), as well as the following social media channels:

[Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Pinterest](#)

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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