

# Lessons for SA creatives from SXSW

 By Leigh Andrews 18 May 2015

A robot petting zoo, global internet connectivity through balloons in the stratosphere and other important insights for those of us who didn't get to attend the annual showcase of all things tech and innovation in Texas this March...

I attended the Cape Town version of the #NATIVEVMLSXSW feedback, given by Amanda Sevasti, Head of Social Media, the NATIVE VML offices in the Castle Brewery complex in Woodstock. She started off by saying South by South West (SXSW) really is an overwhelming mishmash; an intersection of entertainment, technology and culture; as well as a state of mind or zeitgeist. Sevasti has attended three times and, in addition to attending to absorb as much as she could, she also spoke on a panel this time around, on the impact of the Oscar Pistorius trial on digital media in South Africa.

## The SXSW basics...

Sevasti shared that SXSW started as a music festival in 1987, but the extremely interesting interactive sessions started attracting a global audience. It's a little blue island in the red sea of Texas, complete with food trucks, and the ultimate in magic. It's very American in the sense that all speakers are the 'next big thing' and going to take on the world, which is an infectious mind set infectious when you're there. Unfortunately it's impossible to see everything and you have a constant state of [FOMO](#). There's no guarantee you will even get into all the talks you want to, but that's not a problem as some of the best things Sevasti saw were simply because she couldn't get into the talks she wanted to.



Last year's festival is one Sevasti did not attend, and she's glad for that as it was a year filled with fears of governmental clamp downs and an overall sense of doom and gloom. Luckily this year's event saw a rejigging, with an overarching theme of augmented reality to reimagine humanity, leading Sevasti to comment on the terrifying speed these techs are propelling us forward into the future.

## Trust me, I'm a robot.

For years, robots have been the domain of science fiction, with the likes of *I, Robot* showing us the dangers of bringing robots too close to humanity. Now there's been an interesting refocus on the unique advantages of robots, focusing instead on what's *not* human about them and the advantages of these. One such example is the [Ozobot](#), which is used to teach children the basics of computer programming through drawing. It's as simple as 'drag and drop' for sections of code, with the robot capable of memorising up to 500 flash codes at one time. Sevasti confessed to spending about half an hour with it in the SXSW robotic petting zoo, even while protesters were outside saying 'humans are the future'.

On the other end of the spectrum, is the automation of vehicles, with Google planning to release the first self-driving cars c

the roads in California by end of year. On hearing this most people seem to have concerns about safety, but the only accidents the cars have been in thus far have been when it's out of automatic mode and humans are in control. [Read this](#) more insight.

Clearly we're now on the verge of robots becoming part of our everyday lives, they'll eventually be as ubiquitous as our phones are now. Sevasti says to breathe a sigh of relief as they'll be human auxiliaries, not the replacements we've long feared.

## **The 60 million dollar man and the body as your access card**

The natural next step from robots is to touch on bionics or human enhancements, but it's not necessarily a case of donning Tony Stark suits - rather think of low-cost prosthetics, like the [Handiii](#), which is 3D-printed to save on manufacturing costs. Some of these innovations are controlled using impulses from the muscles in the arms, others, like the [Darpa military](#) innovation involves connecting the device directly to your brainwaves, so your brain is back in control of your bionic limb.

Moving on to biometrics, Sevasti emphasised that every body is a key - parts of the physical self are literally being used to unlock and create individual realities, control your world, and connect you to the Internet of Things. Things have progressed from the fingerprint scans and iris scanning made popular by movies - and yes it's actually iris scanning and not 'retina scanning'. That's a misnomer, Sevasti clarifies.

Sophisticated methodologies now include voice patterns and the individual heartbeat and electrical pattern - take this altogether and you can finally use your body to surpass passcodes and passwords. Examples of this triple verification include the [Nymi](#), which uses Bluetooth and proximity to make the world a seamless experience, especially if your home is connected nest. You'll never have to carry anything other than your phone for now as your body unlocks everything - Sev quipped that soon you can say: "You have the heart to my key," not the key to my heart.

## **The doctor will email you now**

This ties in nicely with wearables like the Fitbit, used to track and measure our movements and sleep patterns, or the armband trackers Disney gives parents for their children to wear, which use beacon technology. But of course it's about more than just keeping track of your body functioning. For example, the [Wristify](#) bracelet reduces environmental footprint, it's body temperature regulator - no more air con office wars as you can control your own individual temperature.

The bigger implication of this is that we can connect our bodily functioning information directly to health suppliers to improve the quality of our patient care. Now, you can track all your vitals and your doctor can access it all onscreen, without you needing to make appointment or be consulted in person. Taking this concept of 'electronic doctoring' even further, a biometric smart skin patch is being tested in South Korea, which actually has medicine embedded into it. There are scary implications here as we're "already penalised for buying too many chocolates and not enough fruit on Vitality", says Sevasti explaining that the day's fast approaching where we won't be able to get away with anything anymore, and our unhealthy choices will affect our medical aid premiums.

## **Connectivity and beyond, with a loony idea that just might work.**

#SXSW is all about connectivity, but what about the 4 billion people around the world who still don't have access to the internet? That's where [Project Loon](#) comes in - putting huge balloons into the stratosphere to give the whole world internet. It was launched in 2013 by Google X. Sevasti says this is inspiring, especially as what's sorely lacking from the project is that they're not afraid to fail and actually seem disappointed when nothing goes wrong - mistakes are an opportunity to learn from, which is a mindset Sevasti would like to see embraced more here.

## **Virtual immortality**

It's always exciting to wonder what will happen 20 or even 50 years down the line. Martine Rothblatt of United Therapeutics addressed some of the possibilities for this in her presentation on pioneering organ transplantation. The problem, as explained by Sevasti, is that up to two-thirds of all viable human lungs are thrown away and transportation of the organs is

huge issue. The solution then, devised by Rothblatt's team, was to develop an artificial body to house the lungs in while they're being transported. This has huge implications for longevity, because even if we can't live forever just yet, we can definitely live longer. But where will these lives be led?

We are already uploading pieces of ourselves to the cloud through our constant email interactions and Twitter and Facebook comments. These are reflections of your thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and even way of talking. Rothblatt envisions a future where as technology improves and our minds and technology get closer, we might get mind clones, and will have the ability to upload our minds to computers as digital manifestations of ourselves. This, of course, raises ethical questions about the rights of our cyber selves.

"We're already swimming in an ocean of digital," Sevasti warns, so it's going to happen gradually and before you know it we'll be there, immersed in a collective consciousness. Is that a good thing? You decide...

[Click here](#) for more on SXSW, and [here for more on Sevasti](#).

## ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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