

National Geographic

Looking back

By Katie Pagliughi

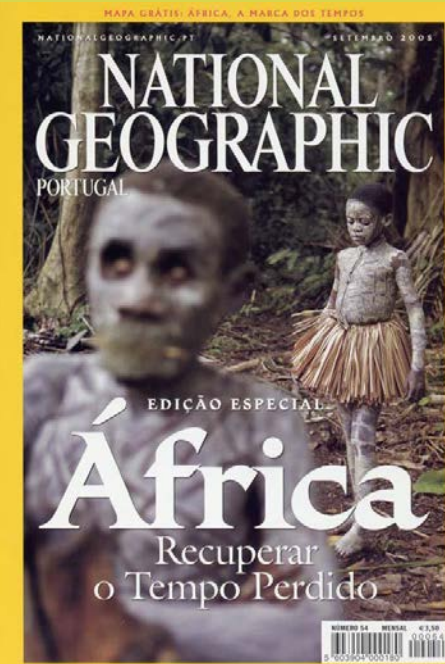
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The National Geographic magazine, in today's society, is known for having graphic pictures and interesting articles of exotic places, people, and animals. Much like any organization, technology, trends, and social events affect both the content and design of a publication and the National Geographic provides an interesting example of how publications have changed over the years. If we look back, what will we find? What has changed, and what has stayed the same?

In the past forty years, dramatic changes have taken place in American society. The mindset of our culture has shifted. As we take a look back into the National Geographic's history, will we find that this magazine reflects these changes?

National Geographic is most noted for articles pertaining to indigenous people of exotic places, and the striking beasts that surround them. How have these particular articles changed, and why?

Investigating these and other questions can provide interesting insight and we can see how this publication has developed and changed to sustain the interest of such a diverse nation.





Two biologist on an African safari, spot two mountain Gorilla.



African Pygmies perform a hunting ritual.

The intent of this article is to provide an elucidation for how and why this prestigious magazine has changed, and to discuss the past forty years, and how it relates to the National Geographic, which is published by the National Geographic Society. I aim to discuss, in addition to content, image, and design, how the physical components of the publication have also evolved. I also plan to discuss the impact of advertising. How much has advertising evolved, and how has this evolution affected the magazine?

In 1960 the editor and president of the National Geographic was Melville Bell Grosvenor. I looked at the articles published from January to June in 1960. Most of the pictures inside were in color and all of the type, including the title was in serif font. There were no advertisements, and most of the articles were written by men. One article that differed from this norm was “My Life with Africa’s Little People.” Written by a woman, this article discussed the life of the indigenous Pygmies. The author referred to the pygmies as tiny reddish chocolate people, which in today’s society, this word choice, would be considered discriminatory or politically incorrect. The pictures taken of this native tribe show the African Pygmies performing violent rituals unlike anything seen in a “civilized” culture, thus embellishing on the stereotype that African natives are violent, uncivilized, Neanderthal’s. As we continue to look through time, will we find this stereotype diminishing?

After observing the articles published in the 1960s, I turned my attention to articles published in the



Gorilla becomes angry when confronted by humans in 1960.



Young gorilla clings to the author of “Making Friends with Gorilla.”

1970s. Melville Bell Grosvenn was still the editor and chief, and the type face for both titles and body copy, remained in serif font. The paper however, became thicker and glossier, making the photographs more vibrant.

During this time one could easily see the mixture of men and women journalists. One article that stood out, “Making Friends with Mountain Gorilla,” was apparently one of the first articles about Gorilla, written by a female author. This article displayed photographs of the famous African Gorilla. These fabulous beasts were photographed in their natural habitat. However, the photos taken, displayed kinder, gentler, beasts than previous articles in the previous years. Could the more gentle portrayals of these magnificent creatures be due to the fact that a woman was the author? Did this journalist put a maternal touch into this article? In earlier years men wrote the articles pertaining to Gorilla, and portrayed the Gorilla as vicious man eaters. Mountain Gorilla are wild animals and one should never approach them as they would a house hold pet; however, in my opinion, displaying these creatures as gentle and majestic allows mankind to have a greater respect for them. I believe that when these beasts are portrayed as vicious man eaters, man’s natural reaction towards them is self defense, thus man will want to concur them instead of respect them.

After observing articles published throughout the 60’s and 70’s, I began to focus on articles published in the 1980’s. Instead of line art and plain design, the cover graphics were more intense and alive than pre-



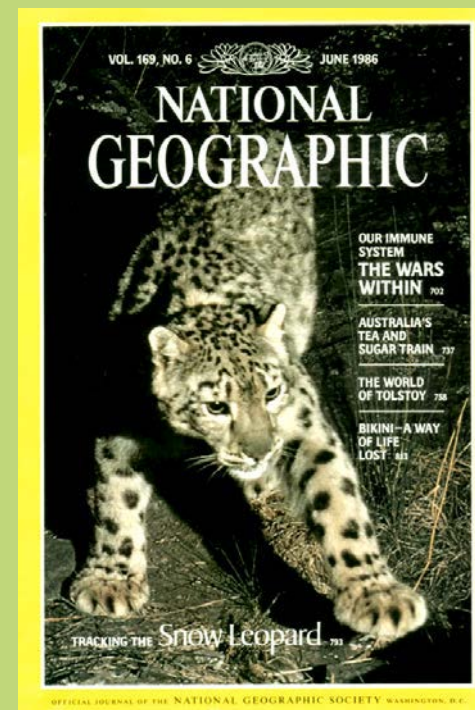
vious years. A picture is displayed in color on the cover of every magazine issue, with the National Geographic's signature yellow border.

Photographs in the articles are displayed in a collage like format, thus showing the advances in computer graphics. The paper is thicker and heavier, and the pictures are more vibrant. We also see the introduction of advertisements, which displayed cars, medicines, stereos, household products, and vacation resorts. Thus one could assume that the average "National Geographic" reader was an intellectual American with money to spend on leisure products, such as cars and vacations.

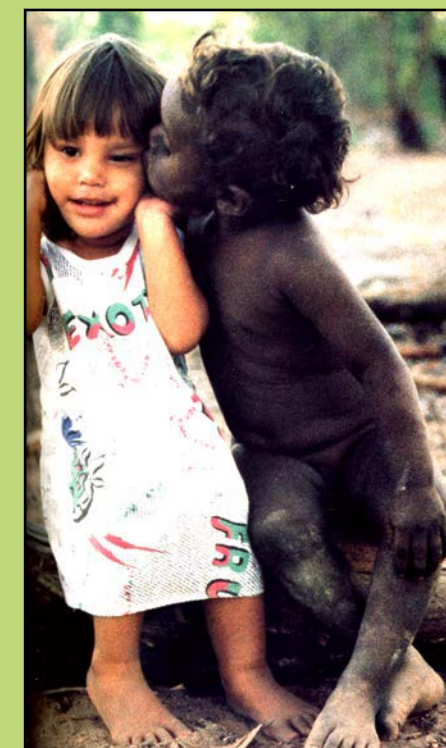
Another interesting change was that articles discussing native people, had photographs that portrayed the native people as less threatening. One

article titled, "The First Australians", had a picture of two young children. One was a young, white, female, and the other child was a young dark skinned male. The male was kissing the female. This one photograph is a dramatic statement about the shifting mindset of American culture, and may not have been published in earlier years. It demonstrates that the views of readers have changed.

After observing the articles from the 80's I moved onto the 90's. The pictures and photographs were even brighter. Some articles only displayed black and white photographs, however they were more vibrant than black and white pictures of previous years. Aerial views of exotic sceneries were observed during this time frame, which shows the advancement of photography, aircraft, and the lengths people will go for the perfect picture. This



An enlarged snow leopard gives the cover motion.



A young Australian native kisses his American friend goodbye.

is the era in which I observed the work of a black journalist, named Roland L. Freeman. There may have been other African American journalists in past years; however this journalist had a photograph of himself in this article. Therefore, he was probably one of the first African American journalist that made his race known to readers. The article was titled "Philadelphia's African Americans; A celebration of Life," and displayed photographs of African Americans who were happy, family oriented, church going people, that gave back to their community. Seeing this article made me wonder if this was the first truly positive portrayal of African Americans. The photographs within this article were all black and white, but they were vibrant and full of motion, which added to the positive representation of the African American culture. Although other articles discussing African Americans were not necessarily negative, this is the first article I noticed that truly brought the African American culture to life.

The year 2,000 brought about even more advertisements. The pictures were even more vibrant, and two pictures can now be brought together to form one image. Proof that computer technology has advanced. The majority of advertisements were now in color, and consisted of cars, insurance, health food, online addresses, and coffee. However because of all of these advertisements, the actual articles have become shorter. In the 90's the articles consisted of 23 or more pages. The articles in the year 2,000 consisted on average of eight pages. This is a dramatic difference, and what I believe is turn for the worst.



For more information visit these online sources

- ▼ National Geographic Magazine
<http://nationalgeographic.com>
- ▼ National Geographic News at
<http://news.nationalgeographic.com>
- ▼ African Wildlife Foundation at
<http://www.awf.org>

Will National Geographic continue to stand the test of time?

Will the publication sustain the interest of such a diverse nation?

Will the magazine continue to reflect the changes in society?

What changes will take place over the next sixty years?

By 2,005 the National Geographic Society has one editor and chief, Chris Johns, and no president, and the magazine has not made much progress in the past five years. Advertisements still consume most of the magazine, and sometimes it even became difficult for me to determine the difference between advertisements and articles. Has this prestigious magazine taken a turn for the worst? Is our society so materialistic that decent size articles can no longer be published? I believe that in order for this magazine to last another forty years, advertisements need to be cut down. No one likes commercial interruptions when watching television, so why would anyone want to sift through advertising interruptions when reading magazine articles.

Over all, this magazine has stayed consistent through out the years. The publication has entertained and informed the public with graphic pictures, and tantalizing tales of exotic lands. This magazine has stood the test of time, and it has progressed through civil rights, the Vietnam War, desert storm, and September 11th. It has evolved changing its social norms, however, today, the magazine is overcome with advertisements. Therefore the question one must ask themselves is how much longer can this magazine last? Has it hit its peak, or will it cut down on advertisements and continue to stand the test of time.

Katie Pagliughi is a writer and editor for the National Geographic. "National Geographic, Looking back" originally appeared in September 2005, and won many prestigious awards.