

National Geographic's 'Race' issue

By Leigh Andrews

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National Geographic has tackled the issue of its own 'racist reporting' over its 130-year history in its April 2018 issue, dedicated to the topic of race.



National Geographic's April 2018 cover.

The media is often the ultimate judge of society, serving as gatekeepers to what makes the mainstream news or not. As a result, they're judged harshly by society in turn, and rarely turn that critical eye on their own internal matters. So it's refreshing when the media apologise of their own accord.

That's why *National Geographic* has been making headlines of its own recently. Long the Western world's only idea of what went on beyond their borders, [it admits](#) it did little to push its readers beyond the stereotypes ingrained in white American culture.

“ ‘National Geographic’ Reckons With Its Past: ‘For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist’ <https://t.co/5rQcGWu9VY>— Global Fund for Women (@GlobalFundWomen) [March 18, 2018](#) ”

It's taken the title's first female editor-in-chief – the tenth editor of *National Geographic* since its founding in 1888, Susan Goldberg – to bring to light an investigation of its own 'racist storytelling', in a special issue released this month that's focused on the topic of racism.

“ New leadership matters. First woman EIC [@susanbgoldberg](#) confronts racist history at [@NatGeo](#). [#DefineMe](#) By [@d_hawk](#) <https://t.co/SeCpWsvyHE>— Laura Helmuth (@laurahelmuth) [March 14, 2018](#) ”

[Al Jazeera](#) reports that the title apologised for “portraying the world through a racist lens”, particularly in its coverage of non-Western cultures and people of colour around the world.

“ Known for its iconic photography, National Geographic had long portrayed darker skinned people as uncivilised, and through its imagery, exoticised non-Western cultures for a largely white and Western audience... ”

“ “National Geographic magazine admits it used to be racist in its coverage of non-white people”

<https://t.co/xPaDuYaLEb> [pic.twitter.com/tv7sspp6Gg](https://t.co/xPaDuYaLEb)— Africana (@AfricanEdToday) [April 23, 2018](#) ”

Al Jazeera says that's according to John Edwin Mason, a professor and photography historian at the University of Virginia asked by *National Geographic* to evaluate its coverage of people of colour over the years.

Not seeing South Africa

South African content made the yellow-framed evaluation cut. When Mason commented on a 1962 *National Geographic* story about South Africa, he said:

“ *National Geographic's story barely mentions any problems... There are no voices of black South Africans. That absence is as important as what is in there. The only black people are doing exotic dances... servants or workers. It's bizarre, actually, to consider what the editors, writers, and photographers had to consciously not see.* ”

“ *A probe into the past exposes National Geographic's racist content* <https://t.co/OpxmiSgEbx>— NBCBLK (@NBCBLK) [March 19, 2018](#) ”

In her editorial letter, titled: “For decades, our coverage was racist. To rise above our past, we must acknowledge it,” editor-in-chief Goldberg says: “We can't now cover stories about race without acknowledging our own past in upholding certain stereotypes.”

She explains the editorial team expected there would be a fair amount of conversation around this issue, just as there was when they devoted an entire issue to ‘the gender revolution’, certainly leading the pack in that regard.



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While *National Geographic* reports reaction to the Race issue has been ‘90% positive’, the [Chicago Tribune](#) says there's been mixed reaction to *National Geographic's* ‘racist past’ admission and acknowledgement, quoting Ron Stodghill, Midwest bureau chief for *Time Magazine* and associate professor at the University of Missouri's School of Journalism, as stating,

“ *...within this push to create content that is a little edgy and also ‘sticky’ for readers, that revisionism is trendy now, and you can start to see that where folks are second-guessing their own coverage and I guess there's valour in that, but it does raise other questions.* ”

Responsibility in reporting on real lives

Stodghill calls it “the most profound recognition of omission about a people,” but adds they won’t get any pats on the back for addressing this, as “telling true stories about all kinds of people, without filters or biases, is not really an option for journalists, it’s a responsibility. It’s not being enlightened, it’s just being fair and thorough.”

That said, it’s definitely a positive step forward and other publications have begun to relook at their own coverage to learn lessons from their past.

“ Following [@NatGeo](#)’s lead [@CanGeo](#) is also taking a look at its racist past <https://t.co/NHyWPvJsm7>— Idil Mussa (@idilmussa) [March 15, 2018](#) ”

“ Oops. With correct link.

Yes, to this. And yes to [@NatGeo](#) owning its history of racist coverage. Do these things white ppl, white companies, white media outlets. This is work. Starbucks to Shut Stores Nationwide for Racial-Bias Training After Arrests <https://t.co/h22tfZeYfQ>— Rebecca Shuri She Ready Carroll (@rebel19) [April 17, 2018](#) ”

Read more:

Goldberg’s letter: [For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist. To Rise Above Our Past, We Must Acknowledge It](#)

[National Geographic](#)’s April 2018 Race issue online

Watch *Al Jazeera* further unpack the role media organisations should have in dismantling institutional racism:

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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