

EXCLUSIVE: Susan Goldberg on *National Geographic's* special Earth Day flip issue

 By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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In light of Earth Day on 22 April and the current global crisis, I interviewed Susan Goldberg, editor in chief of National Geographic magazine on what they did to commemorate the 50th anniversary of this global, civic event and to provide a global perspective on the impact of the pandemic, not only on the planet but on the publishing industry and the magazine specifically, and how they're responding...

As mentioned, this year marked Earth Day's 50th anniversary. The annual event was first celebrated in 1970 to demonstrate support for environmental protection and now includes events coordinated by the Earth Day Network in more than 193 countries and has become the planet's largest civic event with more than a billion people participating each year.

This year, however, the day, usually spent outside, picking up litter, gardening, planting trees and so on, coincided with the current global crisis. So, with the world in lockdown, participants were encouraged to safely honour the planet from home, with various organisations taking the opportunity to raise awareness of the issues affecting the planet today.

National Geographic is one such organisation that brought the natural world inside to educate and inspire hope and awe for the planet. This saw Earth Day programming across *National Geographic's* networks, complementing efforts by the company's full portfolio, and its magazine's April issue was timed to Earth Day, exploring issues affecting the planet today. It was the first-ever flip issue, with two mini magazines taking an optimistic and a pessimistic vision of 2070.

"For our Earth Day magazine, we tried to look 50 years into the future. We tried to imagine what the 100th anniversary of Earth Day will be like because we really are at a tipping point. This is why we created the issue with two different sides," explained Goldberg. "One side showed the optimistic, positive view and also looked at the amazing young people raising their voices against climate change so powerfully. The other side looked at what we have lost and what will happen if we don't make the right investments to protect the earth, with a more pessimistic view. We did both because the facts can support either outcome."

Clarifying what she means by us being at a tipping point, she said, "The future will depend on how people react. Our job is to give people information so that they can make informed choices, e.g. what food to eat, what businesses to support, etc. We just try to give people facts to act on. The more people understand the planet, the more they will care about it."

Here, Goldberg tells us more about the impact of Covid-19 on the publishing industry and the magazine specifically and



Susan Goldberg, editor in chief of *National Geographic* magazine

why she believes magazines are still relevant in the 21st Century...

■ ***Comment on National Geographic's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.***

We have a responsibility to cover this unprecedented story, to bring people the facts and make sure our reporting is science-based. Our response is to always do the rich, deep science-based reporting for which we have been known for 132 years. Our photographers around the world are documenting this. We can make sure we show (not just tell) people what is going on. We can bring authority to what is essentially a science-based crisis and help people understand how we can get out of it.

Through our non-profit arm, the National Geographic Society, we're making funds available to help journalists around the world cover this story. The media industry is in a state of flux in terms of its business model. Our fund is helping journalists cover one of the most important stories of our lifetime.

■ ***More specifically, comment on the impact of the pandemic on the publishing industry and the magazine, and how the magazine specifically is responding.***

We have experienced what so many other publications have: record-breaking traffic on our digital sites in response to our coverage on the coronavirus. This reflects the concern people have and their hunger for fact-based, trustworthy news. We can play an important role here. We are responding in real-time to this on our digital platforms.

We are also looking at what we can do in our least nimble platform, our magazine. In our June issue, we'll be looking at what we can tell people about the virus using our strong photojournalism and science reporting. We will look at the history of pandemics over time, and towards the end of the year, we'll show what the coronavirus has changed.

■ ***This year marks the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. What did you do to commemorate it?***

We brought out a special issue of the magazine, with the two flip sides. Our Earth Day's stories were rolled out across all of our platforms, including Instagram with 135 million (largest non-celebrity brand on Instagram in the world) to reach readers and users wherever they are.

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■ ***This daylong Earth Day programming across National Geographic's networks complemented efforts by the company's full portfolio – comment on the magazine's place in this.***

Our television partners created various shows, and the *National Geographic* and *National Geographic Wild* channels showed 24 hours of Earth Day related content, including three premieres: *Jane Goodall: The Hope*, *Photo Ark: Rarest Creatures* and *Okavango: River of Dreams, Divine Journeys*.

We co-ordinate with our television colleagues all the time because if we both lean into topics and work together, we are able to really produce some of the best results.

■ ***Why do you believe magazines are still relevant in the 21st Century.***

Magazines, meaning both the printed product and digital versions give people different experiences.

“ Printed magazines give people a lean-back, leisurely, luxurious experience. The online experience is more 'lean forward' where people can watch infographics move and experience more interactive content. ”

Magazines pique people's interest – broad interest like ours or more specific. Magazines are a comfort and respite from our daily lives, and they can answer questions to people's anxieties.

During Covid, while our readers are breaking traffic records, they are still leaning into all sorts of unrelated content, e.g. [the Spinosaurus story](#) we published on 29 April, which got amazing readership. While people are certainly concerned about Covid-19, they are still interested in many other things.

■ ***This year's April issue is the magazine's first-ever flip issue – how did the idea come about and what do you hope to achieve through this (sharing both an optimistic and pessimistic vision of 2070)?***

One of the challenges of covering stories like climate change is providing solutions-based journalism. The facts can be hopeless when you look at them in one way. Through another lens, they can be hopeful. A conversation about both sides of this led to the idea of doing the flip issue. I believe we must always give people ways that they can make a difference, so the magazine was constructed in this way.

■ ***And explain, why 2070?***

In 2070, it will be the 100th anniversary of Earth Day.

National Geographic's April, special Earth Day issue can be found online at natgeo.com/earthday and on newsstands, and more information is available at natgeotv.com. To find out more about their emergency fund for journalists, go to [click here](#). Follow National Geographic on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

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