

National Geographic: 'For decades, our coverage was racist'

Historian says past editions reinforced notion that non-white people were 'exotic' and 'savage'

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Men perform a traditional dance in Papua New Guinea. Photograph: Timothy G Laman/National Geographic/Getty Images

National Geographic has acknowledged that its coverage of black and minority ethnic people in America and the wider world has been historically racist, frequently promoting caricatures of the “noble savage” and barely featuring the US’s minority ethnic population.

An internal investigation last year showed that until the 1970s, National Geographic in effect ignored minority ethnic Americans who were not labourers or domestic workers, and portrayed non-white people around the world as “exotics, famously and frequently unclothed, happy hunters, noble savages – every type of cliché.”

In the magazine’s April issue devoted to race, which coincides with the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr’s assassination, the editor-in-chief, Susan Goldberg, wrote that the commemoration is “a worthy moment to step back, to take stock of where we are on race”.

The publication republished a number of examples of historical racism in its coverage. One 1916 article about Australia included a photo of two Indigenous Australians with the caption: “South Australian Blackfellows: These savages rank lowest in intelligence of all human beings.”



The cover of the April 2018 issue of National Geographic magazine, a single topic issue on the subject of race. Photograph: AP

Another piece about Pacific Islanders from 1962 showed several images of people fascinated by technology, and overloaded the magazine with pictures of Pacific island women.

The internal review of National Geographic archives, which was conducted in part by John Edwin Mason, a photography historian at the University of Virginia who

specialises in the history of Africa, found that the publication did little to challenge racist stereotypes in the 19th and 20th centuries.

“Americans got ideas about the world from Tarzan movies and crude racist caricatures,” he told the publication. “Segregation was the way it was. National Geographic wasn’t teaching as much as reinforcing messages they already received and doing so in a magazine that had tremendous authority.

“National Geographic comes into existence at the height of colonialism, and the world was divided into the colonisers and the colonised. That was a colour line, and National Geographic was reflecting that view of the world.

The internal review comes as other media organisations revisiting their historical coverage of race. The New York Times recently admitted that most of its obituaries chronicled the lives of white men, and has started publishing obituaries of famous women in section titled “Overlooked”.

Speaking to Associated Press, Mason added: “People of colour were often scantily clothed, people of colour were usually not seen in cities, people of colour were not often surrounded by technologies of automobiles, airplanes or trains or factories.

“People of colour were often pictured as living as if their ancestors might have lived several hundreds of years ago and that’s in contrast to westerners who are always fully clothed and often carrying technology.”

White teenage boys “could count on every issue or two of National Geographic having some brown skin bare breasts for them to look at, and I think editors at National Geographic knew that was one of the appeals of their magazine, because women, especially Asian women from the pacific islands, were photographed in ways that were almost glamour shots,” he added.

Speaking to the Associated Press, Goldberg said: “I knew when we looked back there would be some storytelling that we obviously would never do today, that we don’t do and we’re not proud of. But it seemed to me if we want to credibly talk about race, we better look and see how we talked about race.”