

Interview with Gary Knell, Chairman of National Geographic Partners



Gary E. Knell is Chairman of National Geographic Partners, the global joint venture owned by Disney and the National Geographic Society, which includes National Geographic television, print and digital assets and related activities in travel and consumer products.

BT (Grace Hong): National Geographic has been known as a

print magazine at its very start, and now it's evolved into multiple programs, such as its expeditions and documentaries. How have you managed to balance the iconic magazine with these newer programs over time?

Gary Knell: First of all, National Geographic is 131 years old, and there's not too many magazines that have been around for that long. Part of it is just being evolved, and my predecessors were smart to figure out ways in which we could decentralize our work, so we were more cushioned against downturns. We were able to be less reliant on print advertising and more built as a subscription-based enterprise. That

advertising is abandoning print media in a lot of ways, which puts us in a slightly better position to withstand some of the storms that have existed in today's media world.

BT: Congrats on the *Free Solo* win at the Oscars! As National Geographic enters into the documentaries space, what gives it a unique edge?

GK: National Geographic is one of those brands that is trusted by viewers and media, not just in America, but around the world. We're viewed as an organization that has grown from different generations, and I think people trust our content, so this gave us an ability to expand into documentary films in a serious way, and just two years ago, we launched our National Geographic Documentary Films with movies like *Jane*, about Jane Goodall, directed by Brett Morgen and got a ton of awards last year. This year, we had *Free Solo*, which not only got nominated but won the BAFTA and Academy Awards- it was pretty amazing. In a very short amount of time, we've created shorter films, such as *LA 92*, which was also shortlisted from an Oscar. We're really pushing the boundaries using National Geographic's legacy of exploration, science, conservation, and education, to engage quality producers and directors who really want to work with us. So far, it's been pretty remarkable in a very short time.

BT: I'm looking forward to *The Hot Zone* coming out on National Geographic as a television show, too.

GK: The show looks awesome. Julianna Margulies is a great actress; it's got an incredible cast. We're really proud to present with the unfortunate rise of Ebola again, rearing its ugly head. It brings this issue into a reality space that gives us a learning moment to not only have a series engaging people but also have people learning about infectious diseases. Through

and the issues there. I'm really excited about it too.

BT: At the end of February, National Geographic became the first brand to surpass 100 million followers on Instagram and received almost 95,000 submissions for its Photo contest. What is the significance of this milestone as it speaks to how National Geographic has capitalized on the rise of social media?

GK: There's one simple answer: we're more popular than Nicki Minaj, and we're very close to Justin Bieber -- we're gonna catch Justin, I think. We get 100,000 followers a day on Instagram. I think Instagram, in some ways, is made for National Geographic in the sense that it's a visual platform, and over 130 of our best photographers post on our National Geographic account. People engage with that, and they can achieve this beauty and amazing creativity several times per day through the magic of these platforms; audiences around the world can go in there. What's interesting is that not only are these audiences American, the vast number of these audiences are international. We have a huge Instagram following in India -- we have 10 million followers in India alone. We want to understand that a bit better, and I'm traveling to India this week, not just for that, but to launch more things in internationally for National Geographic. We're really excited about that. The last thing I would say is that we see National Geographic as a lifetime of engagement: from cradle to cane. Whether you're a little kid who reads National Geographic Kids magazine or an older kid who engages in a game or a millennial who follows us on Snapchat or Instagram or an adult who watches the television network or goes on a trip with us-we feel like we have a really strong lifetime engagement strategy that a lot of other media enterprises don't have. That makes us optimistic about our future.

mediums. National Geographic being a magazine, NPR being radio stations, and Sesame Workshop being television. How has a medium's significance in defining a company's brand changed over time?

GK: I think all of those entities have had to expand. It's interesting because I gave a presentation to Sesame Workshop in 2005, almost 15 years ago, and I talked about how the New York Times got into video and ABC News got into text. I thought it was really important that Sesame had its own platform to the web where it could do lots of work that expanded beyond the television show, and I think that's exactly what's happened. That's a unique spot, but you need to have a 360 approach to people's engagement. NPR can't just tie someone into a radio station -- they've got to have podcasts, newsletters, etc.; they have a very robust future presence. Sesame's engaged all over the place, on HBO, on CBS, with games, with live events. All of these things follow a pattern which has a 360 approach to media and do not just rely on one thing. One of the things we have found with National Geographic is that some people will go into a portal of television and not read the magazine or go to the live event. They don't necessarily cross-fertilize; they don't necessarily jump across to become a subscriber to the magazine if they watch the channel. That's what we're trying to work on now -- it's to make sure everyone we know that reads National Geographic knows that *Free Solo* was on last night, commercial-free -- as one example.

BT: There are a lot of students interested in non-profit work, but there's not a clear pathway to entry, and a lot of students buy in to the myth that it's not easy to make it profitable. What advice would you give to these students?

generation are looking for meaning in their jobs and don't want to just make money as a goal. Part of it is about making an impact. I've always thought that way, distinctively. Whatever I wanted to do I wanted to do

"A lot of people in your generation are looking for meaning in their jobs and don't want to just make money as a goal"

something that was making an impact. I decided that the best way to educate people was through media, which is a very powerful teacher. As Joan Cooney, the founder of Sesame Street, would always say, "television was the greatest teacher that was ever invented," and it's not a question of *whether* it was teaching but *what* it was teaching. I think that's true now about all media, and certainly, getting people who understand and are consumers of media is essential but using it for educational purposes is just as important. I don't think there's a more important thing you can do as a career. These places you've mentioned and [National Geographic] are committed to doing just that.

BT: What have you valued the most about leading National Geographic?

GK: I think being around these incredibly talented people: photographers, explorers, the Jimmy Chin's, Alex Honnold's, and Chai Vasarhelyi's of the world. I think these people are incredibly talented, and I've always felt that my job has been to provide them with resources and promotion. They're the ones who really have the talent and the ability to shine. That's the most fun part of the job -- not just meeting them, but to help them do their work.

“You can fall in love with your success and forget what made you great. You have to continuously bring in fresh ideas”

GK: In a business sense, I think it is to disrupt yourself because there’s someone else who’s going to disrupt you. You can’t rest on your laurels. All these companies you’ve mentioned are legacy media companies with big long reputations, and they have been

very well-respected and successful. The problem is you can fall in love with your success and forget what made you great. You have to continuously bring in fresh ideas because these organizations can get very stale. If you look around all the magazine publishers and other places that have fallen on hard times, a lot of it is because they weren’t creative enough, they lost their hunger - that’s what I try to bring to each of these organizations.

BT: What has been the change and continuity in National Geographic’s mission?

GK: We’ve been able to design the enterprise here to have a real natural process focusing on grant-making and on doing programmatic activities like marine-protected areas and conservation projects and education to kids who are geographically illiterate. On the other hand, we’ve had a big impact on our media properties. We’re winning an Academy Award, we have a hundred million Instagram followers, and we have a robust editorial agenda for the journalistic side of the publication. These things, living together on one campus, create quite a river of success that we need

but it's more about how we maximize the work and create more impact-driven pieces for consumption and engagement.

BT: National Geographic focuses on a lot of research and exploration, but there's also a lot of problems humanity faces as well. How do you balance ecological-facing problems with the human-facing problems of today?*

GK: If you look at geography and the way it's taught at the university level, it's usually divided into physical and human geography, and those are different disciplines. As we try to define our work, human geography has become a very important part of our work. That has to do with the evolution of human behavior, it has to do with conflict, it has to do with all kinds of things. It's a very important part of our remix. The March issue of the magazine, for instance, has a couple of related stories. One is on the El Salvador violence culture and the other is on Carnaval rituals. These are ways in which National Geographic covers the human journey, not necessarily covering the day-to-day China trade talks, but it's going to have a snapshot of the world that gives a longer-term perspective on culture and on conflict that we need to continue to have front-and-center at the top of our work.

**Adapted from a question submitted by Milagros Roson of Universidad Argentina de la Empresa*

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