

REDEFINING MEMBERSHIP FOR THE DIGITAL AGE:

Opportunities and Incentives for Engagement

By Melissa Armstrong, created 10/23/14; modified 4/16/15

"The membership of our Society will not be confined to professional geographers, but will include that large number who, like myself, desire to promote special researches by others, and to diffuse the knowledge so gained, among men, so that we may all know more of the world upon which we live."
~Gardiner G. Hubbard

Gardiner Hubbard could not have foreseen how the Society would expand beyond its original focus on geographical exploration to become the world's benchmark for photography and storytelling, but his sentiment regarding membership is timeless: it shall not be limited to experts. Those who support our mission and wish to share our stories—or their own—about the world should be encouraged and enabled to participate.

Ask people today what it means to be a member of National Geographic, and you will likely discover that most equate the notion of membership with a subscription to the magazine but not much beyond that. The magazine, initially created as a journal of member research and activity, has evolved to become the primary benefit of membership for those who are not employed or funded by the Society, resulting in an "us and them" structure that seems to contradict our founders' intentions.

As the Society grew during its first century of existence, its membership polarized into those doing field research around the world and reporting their findings, and those who simply contributed to the Society in exchange for access to our stories via the magazine. This was a natural progression and an appropriately Darwinian prioritization of member interests, and one magazine certainly cannot represent the exploration and stories of millions of people. But along the way, it became less clear to members that their contributions were in fact enabling our exploration. They became magazine subscribers rather than active participants in our mission. And while the magazine continues to achieve nothing short of storytelling excellence, it is a one-way conversation.

But this century has seen a dramatic increase in personal storytelling. The advent of blogging and social media platforms have afforded every person with an Internet connection unprecedented reach and opportunity to express themselves and connect with each other, and mobile devices have made it possible for them to do this from anywhere at any time. Print is no longer the premier medium for information distribution, and its top-down approach to content production and dissemination cannot achieve a fraction of the engagement that networked technologies can.

The multidirectional communication enabled by the Internet provides us with ample opportunity to re-engage with our members and connect them to one another, yet National Geographic's web presence has not used the digital space to its potential. Our membership has decreased by more than 50% since the late nineties and our dialogue with our members remains, with few exceptions (namely, Your Shot), one-directional.

We need to re-envision our membership paradigm as a system in which members, explorers, photographers, journalists, and educators share stories and engage in dialogue in all directions. (See figure 1.)

FIGURE 1:



Our social media footprint shows us that people do want to connect around our content and align themselves with our organization and its mission. So, how can we establish a relationship with our members that enables that many to many dialogue and conveys the fact that we value their involvement?

Why and How People Engage Online

Providing members with a variety of opportunities for engagement that are thoughtfully integrated into our digital experiences will be mutually beneficial. The more our members participate in these opportunities, the more insight we gain into their interests and behavior— insight that is key to providing them with relevant content in the future and enriching their relationship to the National Geographic brand.

Online audiences have become increasingly sophisticated in their ability to navigate the media landscape and in what they expect from digital experiences. To provide them with opportunities for substantive interaction with our content, we must first understand why they engage:

- To achieve a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people
- To establish their authority in a particular subject by sharing their own expertise
- To improve their understanding of a subject through informed discussion with other members
- To express and/or define one's own opinions and identity
- For entertainment

We must also consider that different types of users will engage at different levels of intensity ranging from passive consumption of content to creation of content to real world community activity. Users

begin by connecting with content, proceed to engage in conversation surrounding it, contribute content of their own, and possibly forge a bridge between online and real-life communities by engaging in physical world activities. The spectrum below represents a framework in which to consider the intensity of engagement inherent in our features and initiatives: connect, converse, contribute, and convene. (See figure 2A.)

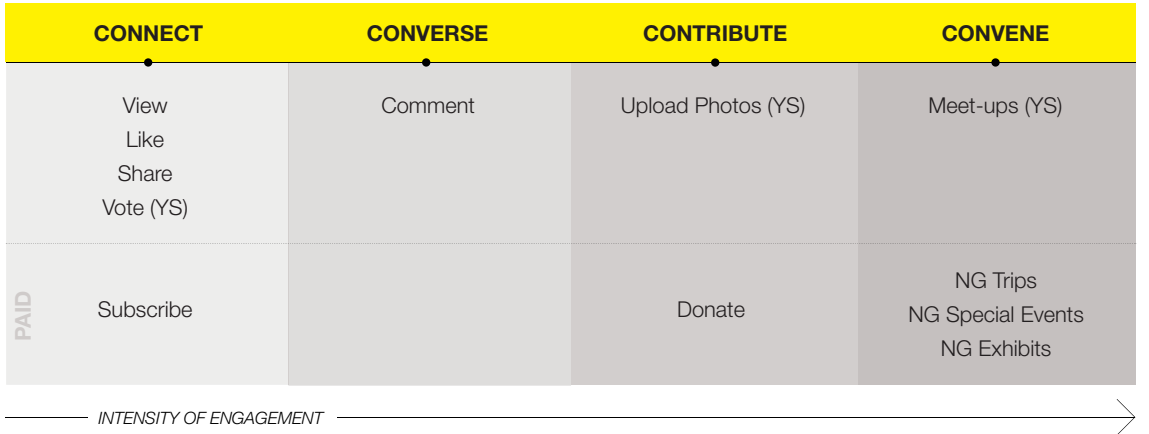
FIGURE 2A:



Existing Opportunities

Nationalgeographic.com currently offers participation options that are fairly ubiquitous across the Internet, with the highest concentration of quality engagement in Your Shot (YS). (See Figure 2B, which shows our existing opportunities as they appear on the engagement spectrum.)

FIGURE 2B:



Opportunities for Consideration

When considering new features and initiatives to enhance member engagement, we should aim to provide opportunities that fall on the mid-to-high intensity area of the spectrum, encouraging conversation and contribution among our members. National Geographic is known for the high quality of its written, photographic, and video content and is therefore uniquely positioned to achieve an unprecedented level of engagement with its members around it. It could be a simple tool allowing them to organize our content in new and unique ways, or a complex, large-scale, multi-media experience. See below for examples of such products and initiatives and their placement on the engagement spectrum (Figure 2C.)

[Notes in **Italics* are relevant words or phrases and areas of strategic focus that I have heard repeated and/or emphasized in conversations and presentations since I started at National Geographic in October.]

Saving Content:

This feature would allow users to essentially bookmark content so that they can easily locate it in one place. They may choose to do this because they liked it, because they wanted to refer back to it for research/citation purposes, or because they didn't have time to read it and would simply like to save it for later. Pinterest is proof positive that people like to organize content in ways that are relevant to their own interests. Access to these lists would be accessible to members who are logged in and should be easy to locate via their user profile pages.

**Users like lists*

Curating Collections:

Building on the functionality to save content for one's own future use, we should encourage members to curate collections from the Nat Geo content library that can be viewed by others. They could use this tool to create photo galleries, travel guides ("Top 10 Things to Do in Prague"), topic-based collections, favorites, and bucket lists. This feature would afford members the opportunity to organize our content in ways we might not have, and to have member-to-member interaction.

**Users like lists; member perspective*

Storytelling Platform:

Expanding on the Your Shot platform, we should enable members to assemble stories from their own photos and words into a rich, visually compelling experience they can share with their family and friends as well as with the National Geographic audience. There are several storytelling sites that allow people to do this, but National Geographic's reach and brand association make it a natural destination for this purpose. This platform would have widespread value to several business units within the Society—Travel, Expeditions, Your Shot/Photography, Kids and Education, Science and Exploration, etc.

**Storytelling; member perspective; access to people and places; dedicated community*

Pen Pals program (Kids):

This program would enable the exchange of letters and photos between kids from parts of the world that are geographically and culturally disparate. We would provide them with the framework to share messages and photos (story assembly tool) and give them topic assignments to cover: home, school, town, natural environment and local wildlife, etc. We could feature some of these exchanges online and consider adding a contest element in which the winning pair would win trips to visit each other.

**Local alignment; access to people and places; storytelling across all ages; dedicated community*

Nat Geo Book Club:

Working with authors, journalists, and/or photojournalists, we could promote one book per month and encourage member discussion around it by providing points of discussion in a dedicated forum. Each book club reading period could culminate in a live tweet or google hangout with the author.

**Access to people and places; use experts more often; dedicated community*

Citizen Science opportunities:

National Geographic's expeditions provide unique opportunities for members to engage in Citizen Science. These initiatives, in which members can participate in actual exploration with National Geographic explorers, would make it possible for members to be a hands-on part of National Geographic's mission. For example, if the exploration teams have large quantities of numerical or photographic data that need analysis, enable them to crowdsource tasks to members in manageable amounts. Explorers could periodically host google hangouts and live tweets with participants.

**Curiosity factor; use experts more often; take members on a journey*

IRL Groups:

Robust forums and community building efforts would enable members to connect in person with like-minded people in their area in real life. We could encourage them to establish local groups around particular areas of interest and to organize excursions to museum exhibits and special sites. (For example, “The LA Stones & Bones group is going to the La Brea Tar Pits” or “The DC area SciEx group is going to the Udvar-Hazy Center.”) We could suggest group destinations and enable them to create group profile pages where they can provide updates on their activities.

I understand that Your Shot has begun organizing meet-ups for its members, enabling photography enthusiasts to go on excursions together and meet with Nat Geo photographers and photo editors. This affords us a unique look into how an online community evolves into an IRL community—insights we gather can be used to guide the development of other interest-based IRL groups.

**Access to people and places; storytelling in unique ways; take members on a journey; dedicated community*

GeoCaching:

The placement of official National Geographic caches would encourage our members to explore the physical world. We would select coordinates for our caches that would take our members through photo-worthy landscapes and reward them with info in the cache that earns them member currency. IRL groups and Your Shot groups could form around the location of local caches. We could consider connecting the caches with photography excursions, partner with geocaching.com and initiate a “**PhotoCaching**” program. (Consider the possibility of sponsored caches, and placement in National Parks.)

**dedicated community; take members on a journey*

Alternate Reality Games (ARG):

National Geographic is uniquely positioned to engage in the immersive and interactive storytelling characterized by ARGs. Using our vast library of multi-platform content, we could create a rich experience that would not only bridge sectors of the Nat Geo audience, but would also provide cross-media, cross-brand sponsorship opportunities which would appeal to companies looking for a more innovative alternative to traditional online advertising. Information required for advancement through the game could be made available through keys provided in sponsors’ products, and the game could include clever and subtle product placement. Note: Such an effort would be best suited in conjunction with a cross-platform content release that includes a television event, magazine cover story, NG Live event, etc.

**dedicated community; partnerships; storytelling in unique ways; curiosity factor, take members on a journey*

Philanthropic Voting in Contests:

For larger-scale photo (or other) contests when members are invited to vote on a winner, we should charge a small fee to cast a vote and dedicate the proceeds to a related Nat Geo initiative. Additionally, we should inform contestants in contests how their entry fees are funding our exploration and storytelling efforts—this furthers their connection to our mission and benefits our programs. **Help people make a difference; philanthropy*

FlashTag App:

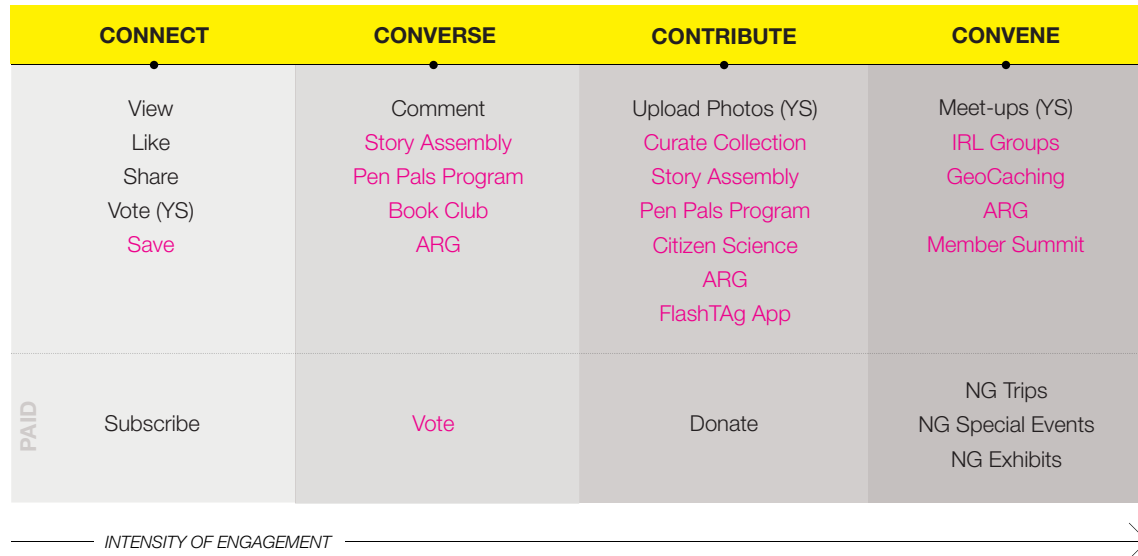
We should launch a native app that enables participation in short-term (“flash”) hashtag-based photography challenges. This would be an extension of the successful Your Shot hashtag assignment experience, but would be extremely short-term (from 5 minutes to a few hours) to encourage people to explore and see their immediate surroundings in new ways, to be creative, and to have fun. Each challenge could be sponsored, and we could consider a partnership with Instagram to allow community crossover and promote conversion to Your Shot.

**Access to people and places; dedicated community*

Annual Member Summit:

Each year, we should invite a group of members to convene at our offices to discuss the current state of membership and our goals for the coming year. These members would be selected based on their level of engagement and/or as a result of an application or essay-writing contest and should be representative of our target audiences. Gathering in this manner would empower our members to help determine the direction of our membership program and its associated initiatives, and reinforce the fact that we value their participation and opinions.

FIGURE 2C:



Incentives for Participation

Members are more likely to participate when there are measurable incentives to them beyond the intrinsic—sometimes altruistic—motivations previously mentioned (self-expression, contribution, a sense of belonging, etc.) These incentives could be reputation-based recognition, special access to content or material rewards of products and discounts. Acknowledgement of member participation not only incentivizes their participation, but also serves to assure them that we value their involvement in the community we are trying to build.

Your Shot currently provides incentive in the following ways:

- Feedback mechanisms: Displaying the number of likes on each photo, and enabling comments to encourage dialogue about photos
- Indicators on photos that have been selected by editors
- Selection and promotion of the Daily Dozen, etc.
- Involvement of the photo editors and photographers

These are all means of recognition that members aim to achieve, thereby gaining feedback and validation of their skills as a photographer from peers and experts in the field. They participate knowing that other members will reciprocate.

Measurable engagement also sheds light on members playing significant roles in the community as subject matter experts and high-volume contributors. These power-users become our brand ambassadors, and should be given additional incentive to encourage participation among new and/or less active members.

Conversation Apparatus:

Our members and interest communities currently engage in conversation with one another via on-site commenting and social media. While these tools support this dialogue, we could enhance it by being a more integral part of it. We should thoroughly investigate and assess this conversational activity across platforms and put processes and guidelines in place that encourage conversation in all directions.

Encourage conversation. Be a part of the conversation. Draw attention to the conversation.

Within Your Shot, members find some incentive for participation in the fact that the editorial staff is actively involved in the community, providing editor's notes, selecting photos for stories and the Daily Dozen, and commenting on photos. We can extend this behavior beyond Your Shot into other conversations. When we publish a story online, the producer and/or writer should follow up every day or two and be an active part of the conversation. This demonstrates to our members that we are listening to them and are interested in their contribution to the dialogue. When a member offers a particularly insightful comment, or sparks a lively and informative debate, we should acknowledge it across platforms— use social media to link to the story again, but highlight the dialogue that our members are engaged in around it. (See Figure 3.)

FIGURE 3:



Surfacing Member Content

By surfacing member-generated and -curated content we send a message to all site visitors that we value the contribution of our members—that being a member of National Geographic involves active participation and enables dialogue among all parties. When members create new lists, galleries, or stories, we should include links to this content alongside our own content. (See Figure X.)

FIGURE 4:


The astronomers realized right away that they might be looking at a system of rings passing in front of the star. But for the rings' passage to last two months, they would have to be gigantic, much larger than any ever seen before. The team worked hard to see if there could be another explanation—individual clouds of dust dimming the star, for example. In 2012, after a year of consideration, they announced their find.

Even then, the claim of a giant ring system was audacious. It was met with a lot of raised eyebrows, recalls Mamajek. The new analysis has eased the skepticism somewhat by nailing down the rings' structure more precisely, and showing how the rings would produce just the pattern of flickering the astronomers saw.


Young Rings in Transition?

The fact that this star and everything associated with it is only 16 million years old, however, compared with the sun's 4.59 billion years, still poses a potential problem. If the rings are that young, the outer parts should condense into moons relatively soon—the same thing that happened with Saturn in the early history of our own solar system. It's a remarkable coincidence that astronomers managed to spot it during such a transient phase of its life.


FROM OUR MEMBERS



COLLECTION
[Space Favorites](#)
by *David Durst*



GALLERY
[Night Sky Photography](#)
by *Liz Lemon*



STORY
[Iceland, Spring 2015](#)
by *Michael Bluth*

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Evidence of member engagement should be made apparent whenever possible to foster a sense of community and allow people to connect with other members who share their interests. (See Figure 5.)

FIGURE 5:



Right now, Mel Armstrong, Stephen Mefford, Amy Bucci, and 235 other members are reading this story.

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Distant World Has Rings 200 Times Bigger Than the Rings of Saturn

Giant planet is the first found with a ring system like Saturn's.

Member Currency

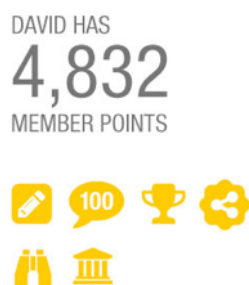
To encourage participation, we could establish a system in which they can convert social capital into something of value by awarding them points for activities. Point values would be proportional to each activity's intensity of engagement. (See figure 6.) These activities might include:

- Liking content
- Sharing content
- Commenting on content
- Voting in contests
- Recruiting members to community
- Uploading photos
- Curating a collection
- Participating in programs and initiatives (Citizen Science, ARGs, etc.)
- Organizing/reporting on IRL gatherings
- Locating a GeoCache
- Providing feedback to Nat Geo

Rewards for different milestones of point collection might include:

- Badges for profile page/leaderboards (See Figure 6.)
- Access to premium content (behind paywall)
- Discount on subscriptions
- Discount at store/online store credit
- Books and DVDs
- Nat Geo shirts, hats, etc.
- Tickets to events
- Chances at larger prizes (camera, trip)

FIGURE 6:



Interest-Based Membership & Personalized Experience

Currently we ask new members to select from a of broad interest categories when they join. While this step sets the foundation of our relationship with them, we can do more to inform that relationship moving forward.

Premium, Interest-Based Membership Program

By providing interest-based membership options, we can begin relationships with members that are based on our core competencies. Examples could include Travel, Photography & Storytelling, Science & Exploration, Environment and Conservation, and Education. Upon becoming a member of one of

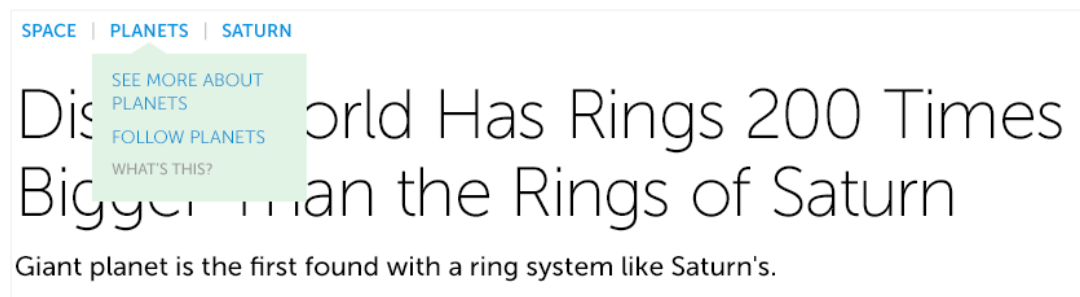
these groups, people would be instantly connected to other members with similar, overarching interests and exposed to content that is relevant to their interests.

The notion of “premium membership” usually involves affording members with access to premium content. While that is one feature we can offer premium members, we can go beyond that to offer premium engagement opportunities. For example, a premium Photography-centric member might get unlimited upload capacity to Your Shot, whereas a free member would get only a limited upload capacity. This limited/unlimited model could apply to other features that encourage participation—storytelling platform, list curation, trip planning, etc. This model gives non-contributing members a taste of what they can do as paid members and provides incentive to become a contributing member.

Passive and active interaction with taxonomy

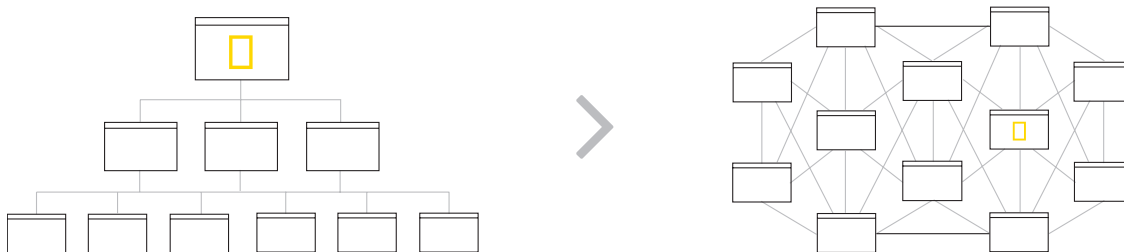
Every time a member (premium or otherwise) takes an action on our website they tell us something new about their interests. We can use this information to maximize the relevance and richness of their experience. If a member consistently likes and comments on space-related content, we should prioritize it by serving it in the most viewable parts of the site. Our comprehensive taxonomical and ontological data enables us to do this fairly easily behind the scenes. But we should consider surfacing the taxonomy with each piece of content and inviting members to click on tags and follow tags if they wish (See Figure 7.) Not only do we gain that additional knowledge about their interests, we are even better equipped with each of their clicks to ensure that we are providing the most compelling and relevant experience we can.

FIGURE 7:



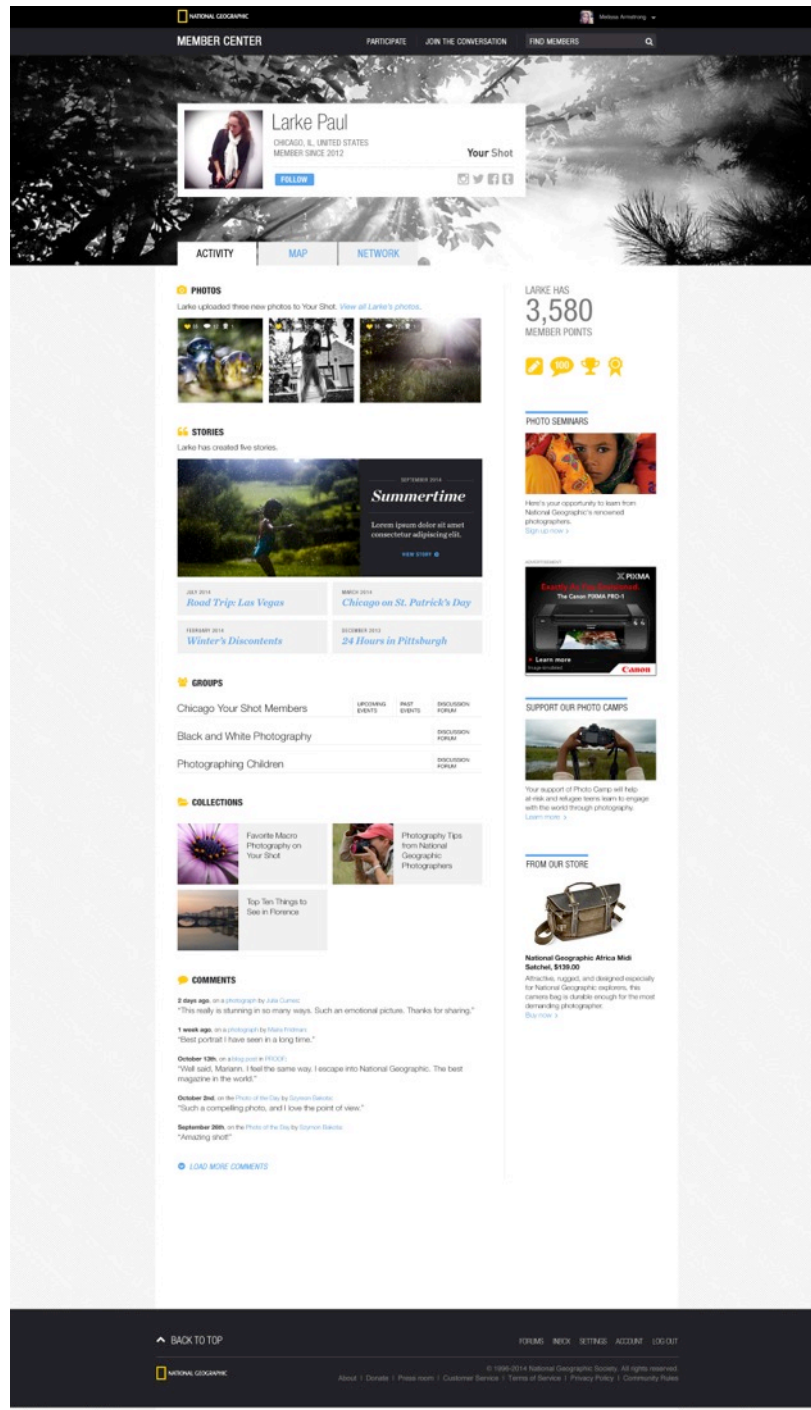
Our user experience strategy moving forward should also reflect our spirit of exploration. Our members' experience with our digital content should allow them to wander down various paths, through relevant and compelling content, without dependence on a central menu or homepage. (See figure 8.)

FIGURE 8:



Digital Manifestation of Membership

A member's profile page displays a summary of their engagement. At higher levels of engagement, this page will provide a snapshot of the member's interests and begin to tell a story about who they are. *Example screens:* Larke Paul (Photographer), David Durst (Sci Ex enthusiast), Alex Armstrong (Adventurer)—includes member map.



MEMBER CENTER

PARTICIPATE JOIN THE CONVERSATION FIND MEMBERS

Alex Armstrong

PASADENA, CA, UNITED STATES
MEMBER SINCE 2010

Your Shot

FOLLOW

ACTIVITY

MAP

NETWORK

PHOTOS

Alex uploaded three new photos to Your Shot. [View all Alex's photos.](#)

STORIES

Alex has created three stories.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC TRIP

APR 2014

Canyonlands

My National Geographic Trip to Grand Canyon, Bryce, and Zion National Parks.

VIEW STORY

MAY 2014

Redwood Forest

JANUARY 2014

Camping in Denali

GROUPS

Southern California Nat Geo Geocaching Group

UPCOMING EVENTS

PAST EVENTS

DISCUSSION FORUM

NG Trip Alumni: Grand Canyon, Bryce, and Zion (July 2014)

PAST EVENTS

DISCUSSION FORUM

Gear and Gadgets

DISCUSSION FORUM

Adventure Sports — SoCal

UPCOMING EVENTS

PAST EVENTS

DISCUSSION FORUM

BOOK CLUB

Extreme: Why Some People Thrive at the Limits

In Extreme, Emma Barrett and Paul Martin explore the challenges that people in extreme environments face. Using many fascinating examples and personal accounts, they take a close look at the psychological impact on those who face these challenges, the traits that enable some people to succeed, and what we can take away from their experiences.

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COLLECTIONS

NG Articles About Camping and Hiking Gear

Travel Bucket List

COMMENTS

4 days ago, on a photograph by Sergey Tkachenko

"Fantastic capture, Sergey!"

1 week ago, on a blog post, "Expeditions: Everest's Compass, Out of Control"

"The problem is that Everest has become something that almost anyone can – and do – aspire to do, whether or not they've even been to the mountains. It's that lack of personal experience and awareness that is the problem, especially when it's combined with an attitude that says it's basically okay to sacrifice the lives of Sherpas to get there."

October 4th, in the discussion forum, NG Trip Alumni: Grand Canyon, Bryce, and Zion (July 2014)

"I love all the photos and stories from the group. It's nice to be able to re-live the trip from my desk!"

September 22nd, on a photograph by Jason Willes

"What a gorgeous spot. I'll have to make a trip to the east coast soon."

September 6th, on a blog post, "9 Tips for 'Backpack Overcoming of the Humpback'"

"Thank you for these tips—very helpful. I will be there in February. I know it will be cold but I can't wait!"

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Inspire, Illuminate, Teach. *And Empower.*

We have a unique opportunity to redefine what it means to be a member of National Geographic, but we need to extend our internal values to our members by being inclusive, respectful, and empowering them to participate in telling the stories of “the world and all that is in it.”

We need centralized resources dedicated to helping business units throughout the society define and engage their audiences, and transform them into active communities. We can then expand Your Shot—our flagship community—into a robust storytelling and video-sharing platform, and build similar communities around travel, education, science and exploration, and conservation, thus increasing engagement throughout our digital experience to the levels that Your Shot reaches today.

We inspire, illuminate, and teach. Let’s empower our members to do the same for us and for each other.