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Flat-Smacked! Converting to Flat Eartherism

Alex Olshansky, Robert M. Peaslee, & Asheley R. Landrum
College of Media & Communication, Texas Tech University

Corresponding Author:

Alex Olshansky (Alex.Olshansky@ttu.edu)

College of Media & Communication
Texas Tech University
3003 15th Street, Box 43082
Lubbock, TX 79409

Abstract

The Flat Earth movement appears to have emerged from a combination of Biblical literalism (e.g., young Earth creationism, geocentrism) and conspiracy theorizing (e.g., belief that NASA faked the moon landings). Interviews with participants of the first International Flat Earth Conference in 2017 revealed that the majority of Flat Earthers have come to endorse Flat Earth ideas only within the last few years after watching videos on YouTube. However, the novelty of the movement means that there is a lack of literature on this group, including what exactly convinced these new Flat Earthers and how that conversion took place. Here, we provide evidence for a gradual process of conversion after multiple exposures to Flat Earth YouTube videos to which viewers were initially skeptical but report failing to adequately debunk. Furthermore, evidence is presented here regarding the crucial role YouTube played in their conversion process, suggesting the platform is potentially a strong avenue for changing beliefs. The narratives provided here also support much of the research on conversion, describing a gradual process of deep personal change, via the relatively new mechanism of social media, where one finds a new center of concern, interest, and behavior, as well as a different view of reality.

Flat-Smacked! Converting to Flat Eartherism

The antiquated idea that Earth is flat has been re-birthed into a modern movement through a combination of YouTube videos and conspiracy theory chatrooms (Landrum, Olshansky, & Richards, 2019; Mohammed, 2019; Olshansky, 2018; Paolillo, 2018). This “Flat Earth” movement appeals to both conspiracy theories (e.g., NASA faked moon landings) and Biblical literalism¹ (e.g., young Earth creationism, geocentrism) as evidence for the “truth” of its claims. Interviews with participants of the first International Flat Earth Conference in 2017 (Landrum & Olshansky, 2019a) revealed that the majority of Flat Earthers have come to endorse Flat Earth ideas only within the last few years after watching videos on YouTube that purport to provide evidence that the Earth is not a spinning ball (Olshansky, 2018).

What exactly convinced these new Flat Earthers and how did that conversion take place? Research suggests that the conversion process can involve rapid, gradual, or several consecutive changes (Bankston, Forsyth, & Floyd, 1981; Parrucci, 1968; Richardson & Stewart, 1977). Were these individuals rapidly converted to Flat Eartherism after watching one video or did it take several? Research also suggests that conversion involves more than simple changes in beliefs or identities. For example, Heirich (1977) describes conversion as a change in one's “sense of ultimate grounding” or “root reality” (pp. 673 – 675). What does this look like for Flat Earthers? Other researchers describe conversion as a more definitive personal change, also referred to as *regeneration*, in which a belief system is enthusiastically adopted after being previously dismissed out of skepticism or indifference (Clark, 1929; Hawkins, 1990, James, 1958). Prior interviews with Flat Earthers suggested that this just might be the case (Landrum & Olshansky 2019a).

¹ It is noteworthy that not all Flat Earthers believe the Bible ought to be interpreted literally (Olshansky, 2018).

The vast majority of Americans (84%) still believe the Earth is round (YouGov, 2018), and most people are not likely to be persuaded by Flat Earth YouTube videos (Landrum, Olshansky, & Richards, 2019). However, at least 5% of Americans say they have doubts about the shape of the Earth and approximately 2% firmly believe that the Earth is flat (YouGov, 2018). The novelty of the movement means that there is a lack of literature on this group, their beliefs, and how they came to hold them. The aim of this qualitative study, therefore, is to examine the perspectives of Flat Earthers themselves; to discover and document their conversion narratives and their first-hand experiences of becoming Flat Earthers.

A Brief History of the Modern Flat Earth Movement

Modern Flat Earth ideology can be traced back to England in 1849, where a religious fundamentalist named Samuel Rowbotham introduced what he dubbed “Zetetic Astronomy.” Rowbotham asserted that the Earth was at the center of the universe and suggested that only the use of one’s senses, or a staunch form of empiricism, was a reliable method of attaining truth. These ideas later became the topic of his book *Earth Not a Globe* in 1873 (Schadewald, 1981, p. 45). Rowbotham managed to marshal a small following, and the first “Universal Zetetic Society,” which gradually transformed through several iterations, ultimately made its way to the United States, where the International Flat Earth Research Society of America was founded in California in 1971. This organization eventually became the Flat Earth Society, which was re-established in 2004 with the use of internet discussion forums and then the launch of a website in October 2009.

In 2011, the first mentions of ‘flat Earth’ appeared on YouTube, but these were predominantly in the context of using Flat Earth ideology as a benchmark of ridiculousness (Paolillo, 2018). It was not until 2014 that the first YouTube videos containing arguments

supporting a flat Earth appeared (Paolillo, 2018). Only three short years later, Flat Eartherism became a full-fledged movement hosting international conferences. What might be motivating more and more individuals to latch onto such a bizarre claim?

Conspiracy Theories

More than half of the U.S. population has been shown to consistently endorse one form or another of conspiracy theory (Oliver & Wood, 2014), and new media, like YouTube, are facilitating and accelerating their spread (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2017; Paolillo, 2018). Standard definitions of conspiracy theories generally entail false narratives of events involving multiple people, usually powerful elites, covertly working together in pursuit of malign or criminal purposes (Bale, 2007; Clarke, 2002; Goldberg, 2001; Zonis & Joseph, 1994). For most Flat Earthers, the elite among world governments, scientific institutions, and international space agencies are conspiring to deceive the public and hide the true shape of the Earth.

Motivated to Believe

People are generally motivated to maintain cognitive consistency among their attitudes, values, and beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Cognitive dissonance occurs when this consistency is threatened by new information that runs counter to one's held beliefs (Oliver & Krakowiak, 2009). This manifests as a feeling of cognitive discomfort which people are then motivated to relieve. Kunda's (1990) case for motivated reasoning describes the ensuing process of discomfort alleviation: when one is faced with conflicting information, one denies it, trivializes it, or makes it conform to fit prior conclusions. When information *is* consistent with one's prior beliefs, however, one will often quickly accept it (i.e., "biased assimilation"; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). Some researchers have suggested that conspiracy thinking is a form of motivated

reasoning in which individuals will subscribe to ideologically motivated conspiracies in order to protect their worldviews (Landrum & Olshansky, 2019b; Lodge & Taber, 2013; Miller, Saunders, & Farhart., 2016).

Conspiracy Mentality

In contrast to the conspiracy theories, themselves, conspiracy mentality (or conspiracy ideation), is a political worldview dominated by emotions such as paranoia, cynicism, and powerlessness, accompanied with high distrust of people with power and government institutions (Bruder et al., 2013; Einstein & Glick, 2015; Imhoff & Bruder, 2014; Jolley & Douglas, 2014). Flat Earthers have been shown to exhibit higher than average levels of conspiracy ideation (Landrum & Olshansky, 2019b; Olshansky, 2018) and have described watching other conspiracy videos (e.g., those related to the moon landing, 9/11, and Sandy Hook) on YouTube before seeing videos about Flat Earth in their recommended videos feed (Olshansky, 2018).

Conversion

Conversion research differs among those researchers who emphasize more psychological or sociological foundations. The traditional psychological paradigm argues that conversion involves a sudden and subjective change, while the present sociological paradigm suggests that the conversion process is gradual and relies on social influences (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018). A common theme, however, that is found in most conversion literature is the concept of radical personal change (Snow & Machalek, 1984).

Another difference between paradigms relates to the agency of the convert – the traditional approach assumes a more passive role of the convert, while the contemporary view assumes the convert's role is more active (Jindra, 2011; Hood et al., 2018, Richardson, 1985).

Furthermore, much of the sociological conversion research focuses on social influences of conversion or changes in social context (Smilde, 2005). Lofland and Stark (1965), for example, describe conversion in terms of weakening interpersonal ties in one social network simultaneous with a strengthening of ties in another. McGuire (2008) suggests that conversion has social, psychological, and ideational components because it generates changes in one's system of meaning and identity. The social component refers to the interaction between the convert and others (e.g., co-workers, family, or friends). The psychological component describes the convert's change in attitudes and values, as well as the emotional or affective experience of conversion. Finally, the ideas that are adopted during the process of conversion, which justify the new belief system and repudiate the previous one, constitute the ideational component (McGuire, 2008).

Most research, however, is consistent in defining conversion as a profound change in self through a sudden or gradual process, occurring within a social context, in which an altered self is achieved, with a new center of concern, interest, and behavior (Hood et al., 2018). This altered self is thought of as a superior version of oneself or as an emancipation from the previous circumstance of self, often coinciding with a different view of reality and of oneself (Snow & Machalek, 1984). Snow and Machalek (1984) discuss several social and psychological indicators that can serve as representations of conversion, such as changes in membership status, demonstration events, and rhetorical indicators. Furthermore, converts have been shown to reconstruct the account of their conversion in light of their current belief system (Snow & Machalek, 1984). In more recent work, researchers have begun to substitute the term spiritual transformation for conversion (Paloutzian, 2014). Most research on conversion, however, focuses on religious conversions, generally changes from one variation of religion to another, or

changes in intensity of one's commitment to their current religion. Flat Eartherism, in this context, may represent a kind of new age religion or its own church, the Church of Flat Earth.

This claim that Flat Eartherism might represent a religion of sorts to which individuals might be converted, while tentative and not the central concern of this paper, is consistent with explorations and definitions of religion put forward both before and since the onset of contemporary, networked media technologies such as YouTube. Here we operationalize religion and, thus, conversion in a Durkheimian, "situational" sense. Understood as distinct from a "substantial" definition of religion, which sees the "sacred" as "an uncanny, awesome, or powerful manifestation of reality, full of ultimate significance" (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995, p. 5), a situational definition sees the sacred as an "empty signifier" and "a sign of difference that can be assigned to virtually anything through the human labor of consecration" (ibid., p. 6). A situational definition provides the analytical flexibility to recharacterize a variety of practices that might otherwise be seen as secular in a substantial paradigm. Absent the traditional, authoritative structures of Durkheim's "mechanical solidarity," individuals find in an "organic solidarity" their own structures for right action – a dispersed, situational ethic of action and self-hood. As Hoover (2006) suggests, "grounding in the self...is the fundamental project of late modernity, and a reflexive engagement in that project typifies late modern social consciousness" (p. 87). Thus, a Flat Earther identity and worldview can be seen in a situational sense as a kind of religious structure, one that explains any number of social facts and underpins adherents' understanding of self.

Methods

We had two broad research questions – 1) What was it that convinced these new Flat Earthers; and 2) how did that conversion take place? To try and answer these questions, the first

author interviewed 20 Flat Earthers at the 2nd Annual Flat Earth International Conference to find out more about their process of conversion, from first exposure to Flat Earth content on YouTube (and/or other media platforms) to accepting the propositions as true. In doing so, we sought perspectives from both newcomers to the Flat Earth community (those who have been Flat Earthers for less than a year) and seasoned Flat Earthers. Participants received \$10 Amazon gift cards as incentives for participating.

This study is part of a larger project on Alternative Beliefs, guided and funded by the last author of this paper, that involved survey data collection and prior interviews with Flat Earthers at the 1st Annual Flat Earth International Conference (authors). Those interviews were used to inform questions for the present study, however no prior interviews were used in the analysis for this study.

Each interview was recorded using a hand-held digital recorder, and consent to be recorded was received prior to each interview. Interviews averaged 23 minutes in length. Seven interviewees were female and 13 were male. Fifteen participants reported being White, two reported being Black, two Asian, and one identified as multiple races. The average age of the group of participants was 39 years (Median = 39, SD = 10.66). Anonymity was maintained by assigning a sequence of letters and numbers (e.g., AB001) to each interview participant prior to each interview and participants were referred to using this assigned moniker throughout each interview. Alternatively, participants were given the option to be referred to by a different pseudonym of their choice. All 20 interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. Inductive principles from grounded theory were used for guidance with the analysis of the transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Emerging themes from the transcripts were categorized and are discussed here.

Results

Participants discussed various ways of first hearing about Flat Earth en route to becoming a Flat Earther, focusing on how it felt and what happened during the process of conversion. From the interviews, some common empirical conversion indicators were observed – such as membership status, demonstration events, similar use of talking points and arguments for a flat Earth – and a similar pattern of rhetoric emerged, albeit with a new lexicon of phrases. Several other themes emerged from the interviews, including similar patterns of first watching Flat Earth videos on YouTube, a consistent use of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, a realization of meaning and purpose in the universe through Flat Earth ideology, and a similar process of gradual conversion culminating in a “coming out” or public self-identification.

Indicators of Conversion

Snow & Machalek (1984) discuss some of the common empirical indicators of conversion as membership status, demonstration events, and rhetorical patterns (pp. 171 – 174). Membership status refers to a kind of organizational affiliation, typically expressed in religious terms through a denomination switch (Hoge, McGuire, & Stratman, 1981). Many in the Flat Earth community exhibit this type of membership and affiliation signaling by proudly adopting the “Flat Earther” moniker. For example, this conference attendee indicated her affiliation and that of her child:

When, um, you learn about Flat Earth and you hear about the scriptures in the Bible, it becomes real to you. ... so that's how I became a Flat Earther And my son, who is 15 years old, he's a Flat Earther as well (AB102).

Furthermore, many Flat Earthers create their own YouTube channels dedicated to showing Flat Earth “proofs.” Many create and sell their own Flat Earth art, models, books, and poetry, while others display their affiliation by decorating their cars and creating Flat Earth vanity license plates. These activities are similar, in some respects, to performances of self-hood that align with literature in a variety of fields, most prominently, perhaps, fandom studies (e.g., Fisher, 2012; Stanfill & Condis, 2014).

Demonstration events are behaviors or actions that characterize public displays of conversion that act as confirmation of one’s status (Snow & Machalek, 1984). The act of simply attending the Flat Earth International Conference as a Flat Earther can serve this purpose. The Flat Earth International Conferences are not exactly cheap and effortless affairs. Ticket prices ranged from \$200 to \$400, and most attendees also had to pay for travel and lodging, since the conferences are multi-day events. Needless to say, one must be highly motivated to attend these events, and the level of effort involved tends to weed out those who may be disingenuous.

Immersion into the Flat Earth community comes with a whole new lexicon of words and phrases commonly used by Flat Earthers. To “flat-smack,” for example (to which the title of this paper eludes), is to figuratively “beat someone senseless” with Flat Earth facts. Other examples of common phrases include, “ball theory,” which simply refers to the common interpretations of Earth science, and a “ball Earther” is anyone who adheres to this interpretation. Another common phrase used among many Flat Earthers that relates to conversion suggests that:

...once you go flat, you can't go back (AB026).

Identifying as a Flat Earther has interestingly often been described by Flat Earthers themselves as a “coming out of the closet” experience, co-opting the phrase commonly used to portray openly identifying as homosexual (Dinda, 1998; Spencer, 2015).

Flat Earthers will also generally use the same kinds of arguments or talking points for why they believe the Earth is flat. For example, this participant describes one of the most commonly used “facts” about the Earth’s curvature:

There's no measurable curvature. There's supposed to be eight inches per mile squared of curvature, which that doesn't sound like much.... But 10 miles is 66 feet. (AB027).

Comparably, one of the more commonly used arguments for Flat Earthers, which is also used as a kind of catchphrase in the Flat Earth universe, is that “water doesn’t curve” or that “water seeks its level.” Here, one interviewee uses this vernacular:

I mean, for me, water's always gonna be level, so there's no, um, thought that I have in my head about it needing to be curving into a ball like a raindrop because...I don't see that happening (AB029).

Another participant includes several of the common arguments here:

It's like, you know, water always finds its level. It always does. And then you find out that the pictures from space are all CGI. They admit it. Then you find out we've never left low Earth orbit. They admit it. NASA admits it (AB023).

The display of these rhetorical patterns differentiates these individuals and characterizes them as members of the Flat Earth community. Beyond empirical indicators of conversion, how

does one come to accept these premises as true? What is the process of conversion like for Flat-Earthers? Participants described in detail what it felt like to go through this conversion process.

Gradual Conversion via YouTube

We asked participants to describe what the process of conversion was like for them, from the moment they first heard about Flat Earth, to eventually accepting the Flat Earth model as true. What follows are several accounts of this process from the perspective of both newcomers to Flat Earth, as well as those who have been Flat Earthers for more than a year.

For many interview participants, their first encounter with Flat Earth came via YouTube's recommendation feed. Because YouTube's algorithms recommend videos based on content you typically consume, Flat Earth videos were being recommended to those who were already watching conspiracy theory videos. Thus, most participants didn't go seeking Flat Earth, but it found them, nevertheless. One participant who first came across Flat Earth in 2015 described his first encounter this way:

It was brought to my attention on YouTube... through suggested videos on the sides. I don't even think that I was in particularly looking through conspiracy stuff, uh – which I... have been in the past. Um, it was kinda just... placed there in the sides for a long time, it was just one thing every so often. And then uh, over time it became more... it was more out there on YouTube. And social media (AB110).

Landrum et al. (2019) found that while most people who watch one Flat Earth YouTube video won't necessarily be convinced by its arguments, it can be enough for some to begin

questioning things they thought were true. Another participant who has been a Flat Earther since 2015 described his first encounter with a Flat Earth video on YouTube:

Yeah so I've been a, I guess like a truther, conspiracy theorist, whatever you would want to call it for probably 10 years. Uh, you know, 9/11, you know, falsified shootings, you know fluoride in the water, all kind of stuff like that. So I was already kind of I guess preconditioned to it I suppose. But I, I've seen Flat Earth [suggested] videos over and over again and thought it was stupid. Didn't even bother wasting my time looking into it. And then just one night I just happened to just be in the mood, me and a buddy where just hanging out having a smoke or something and we're like, let's just give this a sh-, a crack. And then at the end of the video we were like wow, that's ... I'm not a Flat Earther by any means after watching one YouTube video, but that is enough to make me question what I thought I knew... and then to look further for information (AB027).

Initially both curious and dismissive, most Flat Earthers interviewed described trying to debunk the claims in the videos; when they were later “unable” to, they became more and more convinced by the “evidence” (Olshansky, 2018, p 25). Here, one interview participant precisely describes this process. When asked when he first started to question the shape of the Earth, he had this to say:

So basically, I tried to debunk Flat Earth, and ended up debunking what I believed (AB110).

None of the participants interviewed described a rapid conversion process. Rather, what was most common was a gradual process after multiple exposures to Flat Earth videos, initial skepticism, and a failure to find faults in Flat Earth arguments. However, one participant described how it only took him one, albeit 6-hour long, video to begin to question what he believed to be true:

Um, a friend of mine asked me if I had heard of the Flat Earth and I watched a documentary called "The Flat Earth Conspiracy" documentary. It was a six-hour video, so they had a lot of information. Uh, as I was watching it, I was first like, "No, it's not possible" then I'm like, "Wait a second, this makes sense," and I was thinking it's probable and then oh - by the end of it, I was like, "Damn it, it's flat!" But I didn't fully believe it because I wanted to test it out for myself. You can't just watch a video and take it to be truth.... First I started questioning it and then you know, through my own observations and my own tests I started reaffirming that what I was believing to be true. And then after um, I would say ... I would say after eight months, I believe right around there, I was confident enough that I knew what I was talking about and I started sharing the information with other people (AB026).

Here, a newcomer to Flat Earth describes a process of becoming convinced after months of looking at “evidence” from YouTube videos, in a similar way as described by long-time Flat Earthers:

Well, when I started looking into it, I gradually started accepting it....Then you start going down the rabbit hole with that. And after five months I couldn't dismiss it (AB023).

A common production theme for Flat Earth YouTube videos is to present a number of arguments or “proofs” in rapid succession, thus not allowing viewers the opportunity to consider the veracity of any one claim, before several more have already been delivered. One such video, “200 Proofs the Earth is Not a Spinning Ball” by Eric Dubay, presents arguments in precisely this fashion. Here, one participant describes how she felt after first watching Dubay’s video:

Um, one of the very first, uh, Flat Earth, uh, YouTube videos that I watched was Eric Dubay's 200 proofs that the Earth is flat. ..., um, right into the very first 10 to 12, ... it has you thinkin'- um, about, you know, the things that he is saying. Wow, I never thought of that. Wow, I never thought of it like that. Oh my gosh, that doesn't add up. Whoa, wait a minute here, back up. And your mind goes 90 million miles per hour. And you don't get sleep because you feel duped, and you feel lied to, and you're pissed off. And, so, you go on a hunt, almost like a witch-hunt. And to find the truth in, like, why are these people lying to us? Like, that just gave me the chills because it, it, it was that intense (AB102).

Science vs Biblical Arguments

The types of arguments presented in Dubay’s video are common in other Flat Earth videos. These include arguments that appeal to science (e.g., “experiments” that demonstrate lack of Earth’s curvature), arguments that appeal to conspiracy (e.g., NASA produces CGI images of a round Earth), arguments that appeal to religion (e.g., Bible and other holy books

depict a geocentric stationary Earth), and arguments that appeal to one's senses (e.g., the horizon appears flat, therefore the Earth is flat). As mentioned above, Landrum et al. (2019) found that most people generally are not convinced by the arguments made in Flat Earth YouTube videos. However, the science-based arguments produced more openness to researching Flat Earth, particularly among those with low conspiracy mentality. Likewise, the science-based arguments produced less counterarguing than the other types of arguments (Landrum et al., 2019). Many of the Flat Earthers interviewed also express being more convinced by arguments appealing to science. For example, one participant described the ideas about gravity that he heard on a YouTube radio show:

Water weighs eight pounds per gallon. Think of all the water of the Earth.

Alright. Gravity has to hold that water to the ball. That's a very strong force to hold all that water while it's spinning. I'm talking about trillions of gallons of water, but I can smoke a cigarette and that smoke would go straight up, ... no problem whatsoever (AB110).

When asked if it was the science-based arguments that were more convincing for him, he replied:

Yes. 100%. ... I'm all about this from the scientific, and scientific method. Um a lot of the things, you could do these experiments in your backyard or go to the lake for a weekend. You can do observable, repeatable science. And you cannot prove the globe Earth with repeatable, testable science. It'll go the other way every time you try to do it (AB110).

Another participant described the impact of doing his own experiments and seeing the results with his own eyes:

I just still can't believe the footage I'm doing with my own camera. I'm just like, I have to, literally, take whatever was in my head, five, three years ago, I don't know, the crap that's been put in there, and just literally hit delete (AB024).

For other Flat Earthers, however, the appeals to the Bible were primary motivators. When asked what specifically “pushed her over the edge” to become a Flat Earther, another participant said:

Scripture...especially when, ... we reread Genesis 1:1 ... through 17....Um, as many times as a child I've read Genesis, all the books, you know, um, and learned scriptures of the bible, I never read it like that. I truly believe that God opened my eyes at that time for me to be able to see it, and not everyone is able to, um, to see it. And everybody has their, I believe, um, their appointed time ... if God allows them to see it, or wants them to see ... it will just click like that and say, oh my gosh, wow, they were right. (AB102).

Another participant described the draw from both the Bible and one's own senses and science:

Well, I mean, faith. I mean I don't know if I can decide between the two, because they are equal. It's like yeah, like my religion, my faith in God and everything and the Bible, what I believe. That's gonna trump everything else. But at the same time, I mean, my senses and everything that I observe, and you know, and it's easily provable. You can do a lot of this stuff yourself. You don't have to be an astrophysicist to do these things that are simple experiments that

anybody can do. And they should do, and you know, they'll come to the same conclusion (AB104).

Not all Flat Earthers were introduced to Flat Earth through YouTube. Some described first hearing about it through spouses, family, or friends. Here, one participant describes how her husband first introduced her to Flat Earth.

Um, my husband is very deep and I am very ... I'm not into politics..., he did introduce it to me, and I pretty much told him, 'I don't give a crap if the Earth is in the shape of a butthole, uh, I mean, it has everything I need on it, food, things like that.' But he's more on the side, well, I want to know if I'm being lied to or not (AB105).

While YouTube was not always where participants described first being introduced to Flat Earth, it was, however, typically a subsequent source for further investigation. Here one interviewee describes hearing about Flat Earth through word-of mouth, but being curious about it because of his prior interest in the moon landing hoax conspiracy:

I didn't like seek out the Flat Earth thing, it was more the moon landing thing, you know I was just kinda curious, ... And several times I heard people talk about people believing in Flat Earth but I never really got to the point where I got to look to see what their evidence was. But once I started looking into it, like I said it's all I did with my free time like at work. At work I'd be watching, you know YouTube videos in my spare time and stuff like that or reading articles. I mean, when it's such an important and drastic idea is presented to you, you know, researching it was all that I cared about, you know? (AB104)

Another participant described the Flat Earth community's relationship with YouTube as:

...a big library, except you don't read the books, you listen to it audio (AB022).

The accounts above demonstrate various reasons why someone could come to hold Flat Earth beliefs. Individual differences, no doubt, contribute to these separate pathways: higher conspiracy mentality and lower science knowledge have been shown to make someone more susceptible to the arguments in the Flat Earth YouTube videos (Landrum et al., 2019). What's clear from these testimonies, though, is an initial sense of anger and frustration at being deceived. Often, it is not Flat Earth, but other conspiracies that set in motion this chain of events. Once you perceive that you've been lied to, a natural instinct is to want to know what else you've been lied to about; you are then motivated to dig for the "truth." Many then find themselves propelled down the proverbial "rabbit hole" of more and more "proofs" and other conspiracies. Therefore, a sudden conversion to Flat Earthism is unlikely. Rather, most Flat Earthers describe a gradual process of information seeking, and internal and external debate that can last weeks, months, and in some cases, up to a year.

Purpose as motivation for belief

Some researchers find a tendency for stronger conspiracy beliefs among those who frequently search for meaning and patterns in the world (e.g., Bruder et al., 2013). Furthermore, research suggests that distress from uncertainty or large-scale events (e.g., climate change, decline of manufacturing/rise of information economy, decline of U.S. prominence/moral authority, etc.) can strengthen belief in conspiracies (Leman & Cinnirella, 2013; van Prooijen & Jostmann, 2013). Explanations of causality, no matter how bizarre, can work to decrease uncertainty and confusion, as well as offer meaning to seemingly random experiences (Douglas,

Sutton, & Cichocka, 2017). The implication of much of modern science which conflicts with Flat Earth views (e.g., evolution, big bang theory) is, for many Flat Earthers, to effectively diminish the significance and meaning of human existence (Olshansky, 2018). For most Flat Earthers, a stationary, flat Earth at the center of the universe implies a creator, which endows humanity with divine meaning and significance. Thus, many Flat Earthers were likely impelled to embrace Flat Earth ideas for this reason and then motivated to maintain the belief.

Here, an interview participant describes the uncertainty he felt from modern explanations of creation versus what the Bible offered:

To be true and honest with you, I went through the [Bible] and ... it was such an epiphany for me.... [Flat Earth] puts God back in focus, mainly. Because if you really look at the fact that if we are not a heliocentric model, we are not a spinning globe and all that, we do live on a flat plane, then, uh, ... big bang theory's out the window. Evolution's out the window. So, where does that leave us? That leaves us with how in the world did we get here? Who brought us here? Why are we here for? Where are we going after this? (AB021).

Another conference attendee captured the desire for meaning by saying:

I used to believe that we were just out here spinning around. Now that I know that ... the foundation of that belief is false, I can look at how I feel now, and I can attribute it to the fact that we are not alone, and that we're not spinning around purposeless... that we have purpose and... this is a special for us.... I don't, I don't feel helpless anymore and I don't wanna even attribute that to, to religion because it's just knowing that the shape of the Earth determined, for

me, that there is a creator presence or a higher entity and if that's the case, ... there is purpose for us 'cause we are, we need to find out what that is and reach that (AB110).

Here, one participant describes her reasoning for the shape of the Earth and highlights both the desire for meaning and an aspect of motivated reasoning in dismissing the alternative big bang theory explanation for the origins of the universe:

You can't believe in Flat Earth without believing in a creator that made it, you know? There's no way that the Earth and the dome just appeared there, you know? Something or somebody created it, you know? So that's the difference between the Flat Earth theory and the heliocentric theory (AB109).

This participant also mentioned how Flat Earth gave her a new purpose in life:

I think my purpose on Earth, at this point, is to influence people to believe in the Flat Earth. I want people to know the truth. So, uh, I try to reach them through my web site, my Facebook page, my book, and my YouTube channel (AB109).

Interviewees also described the emotional impact that Flat Earth had on them. Here one Flat Earther describes being moved to tears as he recalled his experience at a conference:

You know... that was very emotional for me. That was an amazing place to be, with all these people that think the same way you do.... And there was a lady...who ran into me, she saw me at the conference. And she told me that I saved her life just by her seeing my car. And she started crying at the table... and then I was in tears, I'm just like, then I made a ... I streamed live on my YouTube channel when I left the conference, and I

couldn't even talk about it. How emotional that was for me. I was even crying on my live stream (AB024).

As indicated above, the Flat Earth model, for some, provides profound meaning and purpose upon adoption of the view that the Earth and the universe were created with them in mind. Once this belief takes hold, individuals are motivated to maintain this belief through cognitive defense mechanisms such as confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. Once you've become convinced that the moon landings were faked, the entire space program is fake, that NASA lies, and that the government lies, any evidence you are presented that contradicts these views is then swiftly and easily dismissed, and the burden of evidence falls back to modern science. One participant articulated this line of reasoning well. When asked how he typically handles people who try to change his mind, he responded:

...it doesn't bother me 'cause I was exactly like that for a very long time. I was, it was nothing but question after question and eventually, they're not answered. And then there's other answers that make sense. It's like two plus two equals four, well so does one plus three. Alright? There's all these solutions have equations that work out perfectly in both models. If, if you can apply it to both then it's not the globe's argument.... If you can do seasons on a flat Earth, and you can do it on a globe Earth, ... the ball is in [scientists'] court. They have to prove without a reasonable doubt that they have the right answers. And if I can show their explanation for why they have the right answers on our model, then that's not a piece of proof for them (AB110).

Flat Earthers also universally share a common search for ultimate truth, unbiased by mainstream institutions, as this participant describes:

I'm just a thinking person, and I want logic and I just want pure truth. They [Flat Earthers] just want the pure, unadulterated, unaffiliated with institutional bias, truth (AB103).

Coming Out

Once an individual has become convinced that the Earth is not a spinning globe, the next step, as Snow and Machalek (1984) describe, is to proclaim one's membership status and adopt the Flat Earther identity. Given the mockery and scorn commonly associated with Flat Earth ideas, the process of publicly identifying as a Flat Earther can be difficult. Interviewees described losing friends and family members as a result, facing ridicule from friends and coworkers, and, for some, even the loss of their jobs. When asked if Flat Earth beliefs have affected their relationships with friends or family, many participants seem to have come to terms with it. For example, one participant responded:

Yes. Actually, a lot. Family members have disowned me basically. (Laughs.) And friends have called me crazy, but it's okay. I'm, just like, 'Whatever,' 'cause I mean, they haven't looked into it. They're ignorant, so it's okay (AB111).

Some Flat Earthers have had some support from family while being shunned by friends. This interviewee illustrated how this felt to him:

It's a weird dynamic. ... I haven't had any family members do anything drastic. I have a couple that probably think I'm a little out there. But, uh, friends, yes.

There have been some friends that don't talk to you anymore. Uh, and it's just really strange. I tell you, the, the thing that I see the most is avoidance. But the most disappointing thing for me is that so many people just unplug. And they just, they stop engaging with you. And you feel like, well, do I have some kind of disease or, you know, am I criminal? Yeah, I'm the same person, you know? Um, and so I would say, you know, mostly with in my situation, that the negativity from some of the church and then maybe a few friends. But family... Actually, I've had quite a bit of support from my family (AB028).

A common misconception is that many Flat Earthers were lacking communities of their own or were social outliers, and then Flat Earth subsequently provided that community for them. While that may be true for some, our interviews suggest that the majority had their own communities, were then rejected by those communities because of Flat Earth, and then subsequently embraced the Flat Earth community.

As discussed above, Flat Earthers have often described their experience of publicly identifying as a Flat Earther as a “coming out of the closet” experience. Indeed, Flat Earth conference speakers often urge their audiences to “come out of the Flat Earth closet,” which was prominently stated by YouTube star Logan Paul at the 2018 Flat Earth International Conference to an enthusiastic audience (ABC News, 2019, Mar 29). This was later revealed to be a prank to be used in his “mockumentary” film about Flat Earth (Alexander, 2019). Given the Christian fundamentalist inclinations of much of the Flat Earth community, it’s particularly notable that the language and phrasing of “coming out” has been adopted. One interviewee described her experience this way:

I'm truly out as a full, full-fledged Flat Earther only because now I have ... I feel like I have the ability to back up what I believe. Um, and, so I've come out on Facebook about it, I've come out to my family about it, and I just don't, um, care, um, about any of the flack or the rhetoric that's gonna come with that. (AB102).

Another interview participant explained how telling his father he was a Flat Earther was like telling him he was gay:

Uh, my dad is not big into it at all, like I just got him into like, noticed what, what chem trails are and like, you know you didn't see chem trails 25 years ago. And he's like yeah you're right that is something new. But Flat Earth is like, almost like, when I came out, I was like yeah, like, I kind of think Earth's flat, it was almost like hey dad I'm gay. You know? It was like that type of uh ... I'm not gay, you know, it's just that type of reaction (laughs) (AB027).

As evident from the perspectives above, identifying publicly as a Flat Earther not only represents the next fundamental step in the conversion process after accepting a belief system, but can have profound social costs. While many converts don't necessarily relish these social costs, they see it as almost necessary and inevitable in some cases, in their pursuit of the "truth."

Discussion

This study set out to understand what the process of conversion might entail for someone who used to believe the Earth was a sphere, but now firmly believes it's actually flat. Personal accounts of this process were documented here and reveal several interesting insights. First, consistent with prior findings, most Flat Earthers interviewed were first introduced to Flat Earth

ideas on YouTube, largely via its algorithm that recommends similar videos to ones you have watched. Most Flat Earthers claim to have initially dismissed the idea, then at some point became intrigued enough by the arguments made in the videos to try and debunk them, only to become more and more convinced of their claims while discarding prior notions of a spherical Earth.

The process of conversion, for some, entails a period of both emotional anguish and enlightenment. Several interviewees described feeling angry at being lied to on many levels, as their tendency to endorse other conspiracies would imply many layers of deceit. Some participants described the experience as their “world turning upside down,” harkening back to Heirich’s (1977) description of the conversion process as a change in one’s “sense of ultimate grounding” or “root reality” (pp. 673 – 675).

Other participants described their conversion in terms of emotional reinforcement for deeply held Biblical beliefs. One participant described crying when she realized the connections and implications of a geocentric flat Earth and descriptions in the Bible. Similarly, for some, Flat Earth was described as providing profound meaning in their lives, knowing that a flat Earth at the center of the universe must imply a creator and therefore imbues humanity with divine meaning and purpose.

Significantly, a similar pattern emerged, consistent with prior findings (Olshansky, 2018), where participants would first discover Flat Earth through YouTube via their recommendations feed. A few mentioned first hearing about Flat Earth through friends or family, but then sought more information through YouTube. Participants discussed a process by which they were initially skeptical and even dismissive of the idea, but also curious enough to try to either learn more about Flat Earth or debunk the arguments being made in the YouTube videos. When they

fail to debunk the arguments, they come to a realization that the arguments must be true, and therefore, become convinced that the Earth is not a spinning globe.

Also consistent with prior findings (Landrum et al., 2019), science-based arguments used in Flat Earth YouTube videos appear to be among the most persuasive type of arguments. This carries implications for the field of science communication and for a healthy public understanding of science. If people are being convinced that Earth is flat from YouTube videos featuring pseudoscience as evidence, it would follow that people could be persuaded otherwise, and for other more pressing topics, using clear and accurate science.

Additionally, evidence was provided here for a gradual process of conversion after multiple exposures to the Flat Earth videos, initial skepticism, and then a failure to debunk Flat Earth arguments. One YouTube video, however, can be enough to elicit sufficient curiosity to initiate the cascade down the proverbial “YouTube rabbit hole” in search of more and more Flat Earth videos. Once convinced that Earth is not a spinning globe, Flat Earthers feel comfortable enough to join ranks with the Flat Earth community and publicly identify themselves as Flat Earthers.

Coming out of the “Flat Earth closet” was also described as an experience that involved mixed emotions. While many Flat Earthers expressed the difficulties of losing friends, family, and even jobs over being associated with Flat Earth, this experience was also seen as necessary in their journey for “truth” and simply awaiting those who have yet to realize it.

This work contributes to the existing literature by providing unique perspectives from Flat Earthers on their conversion process. Evidence is presented here regarding the crucial role YouTube played in their conversion process, suggesting the platform is a strong potential avenue

for changing beliefs. Further investigation in this area is warranted. Additionally, expressions of identity and self-hood via the material component to Flat Earth ideology (e.g., Flat Earth art, models, books, poetry, etc.) is also a relevant topic for future exploration and discussion, as these are often found in American religiosity, particularly among evangelical Christians. The narratives provided here support much of the research on conversion, describing a gradual process of deep personal change, via the relatively new mechanism of social media, where one finds a new center of concern, interest, and behavior (Hood et al., 2018), and a different view of reality (Snow & Machalek, 1984).

Finally, the spread of misinformation and an inclination toward conspiracy thinking associated with the Flat Earth movement can have critical societal implications because of the potential ensuing attitudinal and behavioral consequences such as a distrust of science (van der Linden, 2015), distrust of governments and institutions (Einstein & Glick, 2015), and a reluctance to vote (Jolley & Douglas, 2014). First, a broad mistrust of authority and experts can lead to a common discrepancy in accounts of real-world events. This skepticism is fed, in part, by real political conspiracies (e.g., Watergate, Russian interference in US election), which further strengthen the plausibility of even far-fetched theories (Aupers, 2012). An ensuing line of reasoning might justify always doubting the mainstream narrative, always questioning authority, and considering it naïve not to (Aupers, 2012).

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