

A Global Circus

Once upon a time, gigantic encyclopedias were our window into cultures that lay beyond our community. As a result of relentless innovation, we have upgraded the encyclopedia into a new form that not only updates in real-time but also inhabits our phones—the internet. In the age of hyperconnectivity, the average data-enabled citizen is only a few clicks away from Gordon Ramsay’s cooking tutorials, Bruno Mars’s 24K Magic album, and President Trump’s tweets. In general, the high-volume exchange of ideas and culture between countries from all over the globe is causing the world to become more homogenous. Regional accents from places such as New York and Boston are disappearing while Hollywood movies are dominating cinemas worldwide. Despite the overall trend of converging cultures, philosophies, and worldviews, there are exceptions. One of the most notable is the Flat Earth community. Generally, widespread ideas shine brighter while fringe ideas sputter out on the internet, but this tiny group has not only retained a loyal following but even increased in size with the help of platforms like YouTube. Their specific case reveals limitations to the trend of increasing homogeneity that arise from the internet’s juxtaposition as both a link between cultures and a source of entertainment.

In the 21st Century, the world’s spherical shape is nearly an irrefutable fact. According to the book *Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea* by Christine Garwood, the globe concept was already becoming widely accepted among educated people by the time that ancient Greek civilization emerged (2014). In fact, beyond just merely accepting the world’s shape, they were the first to approximate the earth’s circumference (Garwood, 2014). On account of the Greeks and many important scientific discoveries such as Magellan’s expedition that followed, globes are a common object in social studies classrooms, and students can glean or infer the world’s shape without any explicit explanation.

Nevertheless, not everyone believes in a spherical planet. In fact, Kyrie Irving and the rapper B.O.B are two celebrities who have publicly challenged what the consensus believe. Instead of a globe, flat-earthers model the Earth as a disc-like shape with the north pole at its center and Antarctica forming a white, frosty ring at the outskirts (Garwood, 2014). Though not all flat-earthers agree on the shape of the sky, a significant faction imagines it as a dome which encompasses the disc-like earth (Clark, 2018). Much of their core beliefs rely on conspiracy theories that the Moon Landing was faked and that a large global agency is misleading the rest of the world for economic and political gain (Clark, 2018).

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the Flat Earth community is that their small group is growing. Having interviewed attendees at the first international Flat-Earth conference in 2017, Asheley Landrum and Alex Olshansky from Texas Tech University found that a majority of the attendees had accepted the flat-earth concept only within the last few years (2020). In this way, their growth defies the trend of increasing homogeneity in the world. In the Atlantic article “Jihad vs. McWorld,” Benjamin Barber coins the term McWorld: the compression of “nations into one commercially homogenous global network” (1992). According to Barber, the rise of McWorld can be partly attributed to enlightenment sciences, whose core principles promote collaboration and open discourse. Communication technologies are just one example of how enlightenment sciences and its resulting technologies are eroding cultural and ideological differences between countries. Barber uses the Cosby show’s popularity in South Africa to illustrate how the digital spread of culture helped to accelerate the fall of Apartheid. Even the manner in which we speak is subject to the forces of McWorld. The distinct accents that once characterized New Yorkers and Bostonians are fading away at an alarming rate (Wang, 2015; Baker, 2017). Against the forces of McWorld which generally cause popular ideas to become

more popular and unconventional ideas to fade away into irrelevancy, the tiny Flat Earth community is managing to not only withstand the current climate but even thrive.

By examining how their group has managed to thrive, we can pinpoint nuances that augment our understanding of the forces that contribute to the globalism narrative. In an article for the *New Yorker* called “Small Change,” Malcolm Gladwell astutely observes that internet users form unstructured, loose-tie networks as opposed to organized hierarchical structures (2010). By comparing the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s to more recent activist movements like the Save Darfur Coalition on Facebook, Gladwell argues that the internet fuels networks that reach decisions through consensus as opposed to the will of a central authority like Martin Luther King Jr. However, if the internet were entirely governed by the consensus, the miniscule flat-earth community would not be gaining followers let alone surviving. Thus, we can build upon Gladwell’s thesis to identify other features that are shaping the nature of interactions on the internet.

In addition to facilitating the formation of loose-tie networks as opposed to structured hierarchies, the internet is lowering the barriers of entry for people to broadcast their opinions globally. As a result, the internet has enabled a greater diversity of voices—blue-haired video gamers, LGBTQ make-up artists, and flat-earth conspiracists among others—to penetrate the global stream of consciousness. Preceding technologies like television and radio broadcasts allow ideas to circulate the world instantaneously but only media companies like ESPN and NBC with money and resources have access to the air waves and broadcasting frequencies. In contrast, platforms like YouTube, Twitch, and Facebook enable the rise of individual creators that break the mold of the traditional global influencer. As of October 15, 2020, PewDiePie—a YouTuber who posts video-game content—boasts a whopping 107 million subscribers which surpasses the

combined subscriber count of CNN, ESPN, and Disney. Another example is Joe Rogan, whose highly influential podcast netted an exclusivity deal upwards of 100 million dollars with Spotify (Steele, 2020). Far from the production of a large company, the Joe Rogan Experience podcast consists of unedited, spontaneous discussions about martial arts, politics, movies, and music among other things.

At the same time that the internet is lowering the barrier of entry for people to broadcast their ideas globally, its platforms display all content equally regardless of how much expertise, money, and time was devoted. Once published, a mini documentary about John Coltrane's *Giant Steps* Jazz album on YouTube's home page occupies the same amount of digital real estate—a teeny square on a LED screen—as a five-second cat video. Tweets from a Nobel Laureate are subject to the same 140-character limit as a flat-earther and Instagram posts from ESPN occupy the same number of pixels as a soccer mom's post about her child.

The combination of these two factors of the internet—a greater variety of perspectives and a relatively even playing field—have empowered flat-earthers even as traditional media sources ridicule them. In an appearance on Comedy Central's *The Nightly Show*, Neil DeGrasse Tyson—an outspoken representative of the science community—mocked the rapper B.O.B. after the release of his song Flatline which endorsed flat-earth views. Tyson exclaimed “it's a fundamental fact of calculus and non-Euclidean geometry [that] small sections of large curved surfaces will always look flat to little creatures that crawl upon it” (2016). By comparison, sites like YouTube and Facebook have provided a platform for flat-earthers to express themselves even if their views are not acceptable for television and radio broadcasts. In the Netflix documentary *Behind the Curve*, Nathan Thompson—a prominent flat earther—describes how he formed a Facebook group called the Official Flat Earth and Globe discussion (2018). Within

fourteen months, the group had reached a following upwards of 53,000 people. Whereas flat-earthers would normally get drowned out by the majority in a more traditional setting, digital platforms give people in the minority the opportunity to concentrate themselves into communities.

The internet is an equalizing platform in some regards that an impressively large portion of society can access, but not every piece of content receives the same amount of attention. For example, some tweets get retweeted millions of times while others receive only a dozen. In the case of flat-earth, platforms like YouTube and Facebook are not only providing them with a platform but are also amplifying their voices. In fact, according to a research paper by Asheley Landrum and her team of researchers from Texas Tech University, an overwhelming majority of the participants interviewed at the first Flat Earth International Conference in Raleigh, North Carolina reported that YouTube was the platform that introduced them to the theory of flat-earth (2020). Although flat-earth videos are a tiny portion of the minute conspiracy theorist category on YouTube, they are attracting a considerable amount of attention on the platform.

The popularity of flat earth on the internet may seem surprising at first until we inspect what type of content becomes viral on the web. In many ways, the internet is like a circus of ideas where billions of Instagram posts, YouTube videos, Twitch streams, and Snapchat stories are constantly vying for attention and relevancy. Because we cannot possibly consume everything on the internet, we must select which content—ideas, stories, and topics—most interest us. Many digital content creators know this truth well, and in addition acknowledge that the competition to catch users' attention starts before content is even consumed. As a result, an increasing amount of video thumbnails on YouTube are littered with bright red arrows and photoshopped hyperboles in order to pique interest. In addition, the growing popularity of the

term “clickbait,” which refers to extreme and often misleading titles, reflects the ongoing struggle to entice viewers. In 2012, the Korean rapper Psy released a music video that portrayed him “doing a ridiculous dance as he gallops through a materialistic world” in the words of NPR host, Steve Inskeep (2012). Because the video was so ridiculous to Western audiences, the video was shared over and over on YouTube until it became a global phenomenon. Within two months, the song Gangnam Style had amassed over a 160 million views en route to becoming the most watched video on YouTube at the time (Inskeep, 2012). Just as the level of ridiculousness governs the success of flying acrobat and dancing animal exhibits at a circus, the rules of clickbait on the internet dictate which ideas spread, and which ideas do not.

The mechanisms that transformed Psy into a global phenomenon are the same mechanisms which have spurred the growth of the flat-earth community. In a paper titled “The Flat Earth Phenomenon on YouTube,” John Paolillo—an associate professor at the University of Indiana—describes YouTube as a primary channel for communication among flat-earthers (2018). In addition, he captures how flat-earth YouTubers such as Paul Michael Bales and Eric Dubay employ clickbait tactics to surpass each other in views. Implicit in his description is that these flat-earthers while competing amongst each other are also competing against other content creators. Because a conspiracy theory that questions common knowledge and accuses respected government agencies like NASA is provocative, these flat-earthers although outnumbered can attract an outsized amount attention to themselves. Flat-earth YouTubers employ emphatic titles and flashy thumbnails like other content creators, but perhaps their largest advantage is the intrigue that is already baked into their content.

As communication technologies like the internet become commonplace, we have witnessed the rise of the McWorld where cultures, philosophies, and worldviews all over the

globe are converging. However, there are exceptions to the rule and as the rising popularity of flat-earth demonstrates, cloud-based technologies do not always align with the forces of the McWorld. By closely investigating the forces that dictate virality on the internet, we observe that information and culture spreads much differently on digital platforms as opposed to traditional media. Oftentimes, the internet—which holds no intrinsic allegiance to what the consensus believes—amplifies the voices which provoke the most intrigue.

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