

Doctoral dissertation analyzes the negationist dissemination of Flat Earth model

Alexandre Briozo Gomes Filho / 21 de novembro de 2024 / In English



Anthropology | Researcher noted that flat Earthers conversion occurs, primarily, through deep immersion on YouTube videos

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Among social trends that emerged in the 2010s, negationism is one that has intensified the most in recent years. The prevalence of personal emotions and beliefs over scientifically grounded knowledge is what characterizes the post-truth phenomenon, the current momentum of Western society. Events such as the COVID pandemic and the climate crisis were – and still are – examples that emphasized the popularization of negationism in Brazil: even though there is scientific evidence that vaccines save lives and that the emission of greenhouse gas, stemming from human activities, are accelerating global warming, there are people who prefer being on the side of conspiracy theories that deny these facts.

Directly linked to social media, the post-truth phenomenon also fueled the belief that Earth is flat, increasing its dissemination. A doctoral dissertation (from UFRGS' Graduate Program in Social Anthropology), dedicated to understand the causes and consequences of this social movement, analyzed, on digital platforms, the audience formation and the aesthetic dimensions of the dissemination wave of the flat Earth model. The dissertation, authored by Jorge Garcia de Holanda, noted how the “awakening” to the “hidden truth”, argued by flat Earthers, occurred out of the in-depth immersion in media content, mostly YouTube videos.

In-depth immersion and awakening

In late 2018, while casually browsing through YouTube in search for music, Jorge stumbled upon a video suggestion about flat Earth theory. The anthropologist had already been briefly introduced to the term. Curious, he decided to click on the video and see for himself what was so interesting about it. The hours-long video showed a US YouTuber documenting the situation around the topic, and from then on other recommendations of people defending the theory came up. “It was shocking [to me]. How there may be people defending something science already produced a series of facts disagreeing with?,” he asked himself.

The dissertation initial project, that had been following his master’s thesis about homeless people, was restructured. Jorge’s interest in deepening his searches stemmed from the necessity of comprehending how it was possible to support something that goes against science and what is the relevance of producing so many images. “It’s all very counterintuitive for anyone who had schooling and studied that Earth is spherical,” he says.

“These images are, for example, of the horizon – in which you don’t notice a sharp curve. People ask, “Where is the curve?” and point out: “See, this image was taken from a flying plane and I still don’t see the curvature.” There are various types of images. Another example is a video of a space station that NASA recorded, and the person identifies something that they understand as a filming error, alleging it was recorded in a studio.”

— Jorge Garcia de Holanda

The coronavirus pandemic had just been declared when it became clear to Jorge that his research would have to be done remotely. Coincidentally, flat Earth theory, just as other adjacent conspiracy theories, is largely a digital phenomenon. Before the pandemic, Jorge had been attending in-person conventions on the topic and he interviewed enthusiasts, a method that would be central to much of his dissertation.

Surprised by the unpredictability, he had to search for answers using other methods: the author analyzed images produced for and available on the internet, focusing, particularly, on the hundred videos he watched. By connecting the content with his readings about image analysis, he came with the understanding that the in-depth immersion in the videos were the primary means in which the “awakening”, the revelation of the “truth”, and the production of subjectivity occurred.

Among the methods used by the flat Earthers to justify their beliefs, the most prevalent were: (1) videos of scientific diffusion produced by an “official science”; (2) videos of flat Earthers conducting experiments to prove that Earth is flat, such as the so-called curvature test; (3) proofs based on biblical passages that allegedly affirm that the Earth is flat; and (4) images that allegedly testify a global conspiracy, such as in TV shows like The Simpsons, the Masonry organization, the so-called New World Order, and other conspiratorial actors.

The author concludes that the recommendation system of current digital platforms gave a new look to the flat Earth model, whose records date back to at least the 19th century, contributing with audience formation and attributing new aesthetic dimensions. “For us to understand the flat Earth theory it is interesting to understand which aesthetic effects it produces. The reality effects given to the videos by content creators turn them [the videos] effective to a lot of people that have got immersed in this ‘flat Earth world’ and come to believe that the real world was pictured in those images,” explains Jorge. Still, according to him, a single video doesn’t make a flat Earther: in-depth immersion is essential for the birth of a sympathizer of the theory.

The movement cool down, but branches out

Since when YouTube started to regulate ads around the flat Earth theory, the presence of the topic in social discussions has been decreasing. Consequently, migrating to channels such as Telegram was one of the alternatives adopted by these groups. In the beginning of the pandemic, this community experienced a discursive convergence, encompassing the negationism regarding the vaccine effectiveness and the credibility of the social institutions.

Since November, Jorge has been the substitute Anthropology professor at Federal University of Ceará. “I have been very busy lately, with a lot of classes to handle. Still haven’t been able to come back to my research, even to develop my article around it,” he reports. Despite the current responsibilities, the anthropologist aims, at a given point, to further develop the ideas explored in his dissertation, focusing on digital platforms, on the aesthetic dimensions and algorithm recommendations.

Translated into English by **Kethlyn Santos Machado**, undergraduate student enrolled in the course “Supervised Translation Training I (English)” of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamarí R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS.

:: Read in portuguese

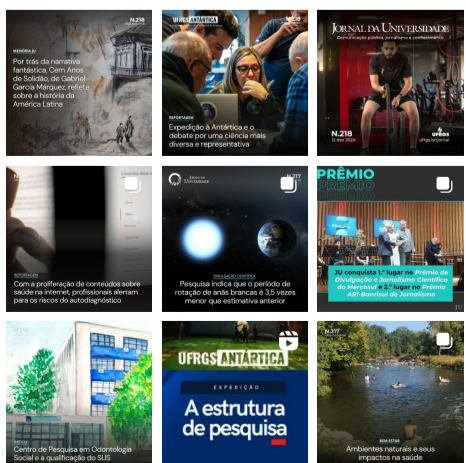
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