

Paolo Castro
Dr. Leacock
Senior Thesis
September 19, 2018

Prospectus Draft

Introduction

For non-trivial issues, convincing someone of your beliefs can prove to be very difficult. Even in formal debate, which attempts to maximize civil conversation and minimize anger, often no one changes their mind. In some situations, it may be the case that there is no right interpretation or solution to a question, so both parties may not be necessarily wrong. However, even for issues that have objectively true solutions, people don't tend to change their minds. This is due to a psychological phenomenon called *cognitive dissonance*. Encyclopedia Britannica describes cognitive dissonance as follows: "Cognitive dissonance, the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information. The unease or tension that the conflict arouses in people is relieved by one of the several defensive maneuvers: they reject, explain away, or avoid the new information; persuade themselves that no conflict really exists; reconcile the differences; or resort to any other defensive means of preserving the stability or order in their conceptions of the world and of themselves" ("Cognitive Dissonance"). The reason that cognitive dissonance prevents the changing of minds is because there are many more options to resolve the "mental conflict" that don't involve changing minds than options that do. This thesis will explore the cognitive dissonance regarding the flat earth movement.

I consider myself a skeptic, and I enjoy observing online conversations and debates about controversial issues. One of the things I get frustrated about the most, though, is when people display their cognitive dissonance in a conversation. Sometimes this takes form in merely making up a counter argument on the spot, or it can be as extreme as flat out ignoring the other side's argument. For issues that have an objectively true interpretation, such as the flat earth movement, the scientist in me gets frustrated with not only flat earthers cognitive dissonance, but also their scientific illiteracy. If there was some way to avoid, or at least minimize the effects of, cognitive dissonance, scientifically proven facts would be accepted by the public more easily and

the world would be a better place because of it. As a skeptic and a scientist, this area of study interests me not only by curiosity, but because I believe this research can improve humanity as a whole.

About the Research

In order to address the issue of cognitive dissonance, the thesis will first have to briefly explore the meaning of cognitive dissonance and some of the psychological research that has been done already to explain it. With a more thorough understanding of cognitive dissonance, a deeper understanding of why flat earth movement exists can be developed. Another issue that would help in understanding this would be to research if cognitive dissonance is voluntary, involuntary, or maybe something in between. Finally, the thesis will explore how the knowledge of this concept affects a person's cognitive dissonance. Overall, the thesis is planned to answer the question: "Does the knowledge of cognitive dissonance help avoid it regarding the flat earth movement on YouTube?"

Working Knowledge

As mentioned before, cognitive dissonance is the internal conflict of ideas that causes quite powerful discomfort. The discomfort is then followed by an attempt to resolve the inconsistency by either rejecting one of the contradictory ideas (usually the new information), or somehow accepting both ideas as true ("Cognitive Dissonance"). According to Verywell, the term *cognitive dissonance* was coined by Leon Festinger in 1957. There is in fact a degree of dissonance which depends on how much a person values a particular belief. Cognitive dissonance doesn't happen that often in daily life, but it can happen anywhere. Usually, experiences of cognitive dissonance happen during situations where a person's behavior conflicts with a belief that they value very highly. Less often, however, cognitive dissonance can occur when a person is presented with new, conflicting information from an outside source. Similar to totally internal conflict, dissonance caused by new information will lead the individual to resolve the contradiction, usually by rejecting the new information (Cherry).

Research Ideas

In order to understand the flat earth movement, it would be incredibly helpful to interview people on both sides of the debate. There are a *lot* of people on YouTube arguing both

for the flat earth model and the round earth model. It would be easy to find at least two people (preferable more) who would be willing to be interviewed for this thesis. If it's needed, a survey given to Bosque students might provide useful information as well.

As for sources, it should be very easy to get both primary and secondary sources. The obvious primary sources, which could supply a very large amount of information, would be the interviews and YouTube videos featuring people displaying cognitive dissonance or talking about it. Popular round earth advocates, and potential interviewees, are YouTube usernames "Professor Stick" and "CoolHardLogic." Flat earth advocates include "Flat Earth Crush" and "Flat Earth Talk" (the names of the owners of these channels are hard to find). This list is not exhaustive, and there are plenty of both round and flat earthers to interview. Two potential secondary sources could be *Cognitive Dissonance* (Festinger), found through Jstor, and *Cognitive dissonance: Private ratiocination or public spectacle?* (Tedeschi et al), found through the American Psychological Association. These sources can be starting points and additional sources can be found through the library resources if need be.

This project, I believe, has few challenges to overcome in terms of research, though there are some. An issue I foresee would be to convince flat earthers to be interviewed by a round earther. Especially on YouTube, there has been a tendency to ridicule flat earthers, which may make them hesitant to participate in my project. This may be a problem as there are significantly fewer people producing pro flat earth content on YouTube as the percentage of people who believe and support that kind of content is very small. If worst comes to worst, a replacement interviewee could be a flat earther who does not post videos on YouTube. This should hardly be a problem.

Conclusion

This project is unique because there has been a tendency among scholars to scoff and make fun of flat earthers. Although I can't sympathize at all with the flat earth movement, I can understand their resentment towards the people who are ridiculing them unnecessarily harshly. This thesis aims to discover something new about cognitive dissonance while respecting the other side.

Works Cited

- Cherry, Kendra. "What Is Cognitive Dissonance?" Verywell Mind, Verywellmind, 27 Aug. 2018, www.verywellmind.com/what-is-cognitive-dissonance-2795012.
- "Cognitive Dissonance." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 14 June 2018, www.britannica.com/science/cognitive-dissonance.
- Festinger, Leon. "Cognitive Dissonance." *Scientific American*, vol. 207, no. 4, 1962, pp. 93–106., www.jstor.org/stable/24936719.
- Tedeschi, J. T., Schlenker, B. R., & Bonoma, T. V. "Cognitive dissonance: Private ratiocination or public spectacle?" *American Psychologist*, 26(8), 685-695.
<http://psycnet.apa.org/record/1972-10747-001>