

# The Earth is round, and other myths, debunked by the flat Earth movement (you read that right)

Bob Knodel, host of Globebusters channel on YouTube, who believes Earth is flat, tries to prove it with a globe at a flat Earth meeting in Golden, Colo. (David Kelly / For The Times)

By **David Kelly**

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**M**oving with missionary zeal, Nathan Thompson swept into a brewpub here bearing a battered globe under his arm with the words “this is a scam” scrawled on the side.

He dropped the defaced orb like a vanquished enemy on a table amid pints of beer.

“They say we are cult,” he announced, “but the globe is the biggest cult of all.”

Thompson, the 31-year-old host of the Official Flat Earth Globe & Discussion group on Facebook, was guest of honor at the night’s flat Earth meet-up. Clad in a green jumpsuit festooned with flat Earth maps, he worked the room hard all the while proclaiming Earth is less a big blue marble than a big blue pancake.

A 16-year-old boy approached and said his friend had started a GoFundMe campaign to prove the world is a disk. Moments later a middle-aged man declared, “Earth is flat, not spheroid!”

Thompson beamed.

“This is not a conspiracy theory,” he said. “This is a conspiracy fact.”

With more people rejecting traditional sources of information and the internet giving rise to a variety of alternative worldviews, the granddaddy of all conspiracy theories is enjoying a renaissance and Colorado is the epicenter.

Thousands of YouTube videos claim the world is flat, gravity is uncertain, space is fake and the curvature of the planet is an optical illusion. Followers say this ruse is perpetuated by a powerful cabal determined to make humans feel small and powerless.

A conspiratorial mind-set and a deep current of religious ideology permeate the movement, which preaches that Earth was created by design, not by accident. As evidence of its shape, some reference Bible verses touting “the four corners of the Earth,” “foundations of the Earth” and Earth being God’s “footstool.”

Many of the most popular flat Earth videos come out of Colorado, host of next year’s Flat Earth International Conference along with the Colorado International Flat Earth Film Festival.

Mark Sargent, a software analyst from Boulder now living in Seattle, is the primary organizer of the movement and has made more than a thousand videos. He believes Colorado’s open-mindedness accounts for its prominent position among believers.

Back in 2015, when he typed “flat Earth” into YouTube he’d get 50,000 hits. Now it’s more than 18.7 million, beating out Lady Gaga and closing in on Donald Trump at about 21.3 million. Sargent said he suspects millions of believers remain “in the closet” to avoid ridicule.

“My channel broke 10 million views in December,” he said. “This is my full-time job now.”

Sargent, 49, became a believer after watching videos and realizing he could “no longer prove the globe.”

The flat Earth revival, he said, can be explained in large part by YouTube, increased skepticism of authority and the message of hope it conveys.

“You’re not on a tiny little speck of rock just flying through this endless, incomprehensible universe and you are not small,” said Sargent, who believes Earth is beneath a dome. “It was built just for you. All the world is a stage and you’re in it. You are on a ride. Part stage, part terrarium, part planetarium. Whatever it is, it is very deliberate.”

The concept of a flat Earth goes back to the Bronze Age. Later on, Greek philosophers and mathematicians like Ptolemy, Aristotle and Pythagoras used calculations and observations of Earth's curved shadow on the moon during lunar eclipses to conclude the planet was round.

Yet millenniums later that still doesn't sit well for some.

One of the nation's first meet-ups dedicated to the flat Earth cause convenes weekly at the Purple Cup Cafe in Fort Collins. For many, it's a safe space to discuss matters others might scoff at.

John Vnuk started it in 2016 and soon received more than 200 calls from people eager to know more.

"I suspect there are more people open to the idea of flat Earth than we think," he said. "We had a multitude of engineers attend our meeting ... who just would rather have a peaceful life with full employment than join the battle."

At a recent meeting, Nathan Nichols, 39, rattled off "proofs" for a tabular Earth. He said it looks curved from high altitudes because of wide-angle camera lenses. Ships disappear over the horizon because of the limits of human vision, not a spherical world.

Some members believe Earth is surrounded by a wall of ice holding back the seas while others suspect it's an infinite plane. Circumnavigating the world, they explain, is simply traveling in a big circle.

"I don't know the motivation for hiding the truth," Nichols said. "The sobering part of this is that you have been lied to and continue to be lied to."

As conspiracies go, this one is remarkably nonpartisan, said Joseph Uscinski, associate professor of political science at the University of Miami and author of the book "American Conspiracy Theories."

"Just like some have a left- or right-wing worldview, some people have a conspiratorial worldview where they think every institution is a liar," he said. "These people are living in the matrix, they are brains in a jar where everything they see and hear is absolutely fake."

The Los Angeles-based Independent Investigations Group, which looks into claims of the paranormal and pseudoscience, plans a test in the coming weeks at the Salton Sea hoping to convince a group of flat Earthers. They will fire a laser eight feet above the water to a target on the other side.

"If the Earth is flat the laser will stay at eight feet the whole way," said Spencer Marks, an investigator with the group. "If it's curved, it will descend toward the surface of the water."

Marks has debated flat Earthers including Thompson, but he's not a scientist. In fact, few scientists have weighed in.

“Science doesn’t even get their arguments out there,” Sargent said. “They try to beat us with math but people don’t understand it. It might as well be static, so they listen to me.”

David Falk, assistant professor of astronomy at Los Angeles Valley College, thinks that’s a mistake.

“The serious science community feels it’s so basic that they don’t want to waste their time debunking it,” he said. “But this is a scary thing.... The danger isn’t that people don’t believe the Earth is round, it’s the lack of scientific literacy.”

Back at the Golden pub, Bob Knodel, a 57-year-old engineer whose “Globebusters” series has more than 2.6 million views on YouTube, held forth on the flat Earth universe.

“The sun is about 3,419.5 miles away by my calculations. It’s not a burning ball of hydrogen gas, it is electrostatic energy,” he said. “We don’t know how it’s powered.”

Brian Gegan, 55 and not a flat Earther, wandered over.

“So you believe the Earth is flat and stationary?” he asked.

Thompson jumped in: “We don’t believe, we know. We live in a closed system. The Earth is not spinning. What would keep us on it if it was spinning so fast?”

“Gravity,” said Gegan.

“Gravity has never been proven,” Thompson said.

Gegan asked why it would be hidden.

“They want to dissuade you from the idea of a God,” Knodel said. “Beyond that, as a way to control your mind. They want us to think that we aren’t special, but we are.”

Gegan walked away unconvinced.

**Kelly is a special correspondent.**

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