

A report released in July by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a London think tank, found that Australia has one of the largest QAnon followings in the world.

The ISD, an organisation “dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation”, analysed social media activity to better understand the far-right conspiracy theory known as QAnon. The theory revolves around the idea of a cabal of paedophiles who are plotting against US President, Donald Trump.

“We found that the top four countries driving discussion of QAnon on Twitter were the US, the UK, Canada and Australia,” the report said.

The rise in popularity of this theory could be a “a by-product of people spending more time on social media as a result of COVID-19”.

Dr Colin Klein, an associate Professor in the School of Philosophy at the Australian National University, studies conspiracy theories and their origins.

On why these beliefs are becoming increasingly popular in Australia, Dr Klein said he “would suspect that it’s actually spill-over from US right-wing media”.

“Many of the narratives you see are copy-pasted from the US, and often don’t make a heap of sense in an Australian context.”

These narratives may just serve as support for someone’s political beliefs. “We do see a phenomenon whereby people will assert conspiracy theories more to express a political viewpoint, but won’t necessarily fully believe them,” Dr Klein said.

These theories may also arise as a coping mechanism in times of crisis, “people are scared and want to know what’s going to happen”, he said.

Some people may be more inclined to react like this if they’re generally suspicious or have a tendency to see patterns.

“There is evidence that certain psychological traits correlate with belief in conspiracy theories,” Dr Klein said.

But, what “enables conspiracy theorizing” predominantly is the internet and internet platforms, he said.

“The internet allows for a much more participatory approach, where people can build up stories together.”

Sarah Blackman, a nurse and Trump supporter, said her politics has shifted further to the right, partly because of “Facebook algorithms”.

A few years ago, she “was very trusting of the government and mainstream media”.

“As I was a nurse, I guess I treaded closer towards a left political policy, and on some things, I still do.”

Now, she said, she’s “much less trusting of government word” because of “things that have come out publicly in the last few years.”

She prefers to get her news from “smaller platforms” to avoid the “narrative being pushed by the media,” she said.

Dr Klein does not see this shift towards fringe beliefs “slowing down on its own”.

“I think it’s hard to find a good balance for suppressing content, but one thing that tech companies can do is slow the rapid spread of ideas and make sure that people are taking a more sensible approach to the things they read,” he said.