

“The National Emergency Declaration and Interest in the QAnon Conspiracy Theory”

Prof. Ahmed Skali

University of Groningen

Health misinformation is rife, particularly regarding COVID-19. A prominent conspiracy theory, QAnon, views the pandemic as a deliberate attempt to exercise control over the population. We study whether the declaration of a national emergency in March 2020 is met with conspiratorial backlash, and if so, why, and whether there are public health consequences. We find a steep rise in interest in QAnon across the United States, as measured by Google searches, immediately after the national emergency declaration. The main mechanism appears to be that “seeing is believing”: the rise in interest in QAnon is larger in areas with fewer cases of the virus, suggesting people are more prone to doubting the pandemic unless they can “see” large numbers of sick people. Our results are not attributable to increased internet use, economic motives, political distrust, polarization, or to systematic reactions to severe adverse events. Interest in conspiracy theories can account for approximately 146,000 cases of and 7,500 deaths from the virus in the United States between March and May 2020, with differences in mobility behaviour accounting for all QAnon-related cases and deaths.