Even Borat couldn’t make this stuff up

IN ONE of the many terrific lines from the movie *Borat*, the TV journalist from Kazakhstan fearfully insists on driving to California rather than flying “in case the Jews repeat their attacks of 9/11”.

It is, of course, a joke, and it’s a joke at the expense of the unhinged conspiracy theorists who subscribe to such bable.

It is also a joke that has felt less funny over the course of the past couple of weeks, when the extent to which our planet is being rendered ignorant by crackpots and BS artists has been laid bare.

In this age of alternative facts, it is not surprising someone who is smart enough to get herself elected repeatedly to public office might still be foolish enough to rudiment publicly about what “really” went on at Port Arthur in 1996.

Or for her university-educated advisor to do the same about what he calls “the whole 9/11 thing”, the “thing” part being the apparently contestable claim that a bunch of Middle Eastern terrorists murdered more than 3000 people by flying hijacked planes into buildings symbolising democracy and capitalism.

This bland and historically accurate account of 9/11 is a red rag to the conspiracy theorists, with all their mad talk of controlled detonations, Mossad involvement, Jews mysteriously failing to arrive for work at the World Trade Centre on the morning of September II, and unexplained spot fires in towers not affected by the crashing planes. When Apple launched its iPad in 2010, the first advertisement featured fast-motion images of Da Vinci’s anatomical line drawings, dinosaur bones, the inner workings of clocks, language apps and videos of orchestral performances, all of it promising a new intellectual frontier.

The hollow promise of the digital age was that the internet was going to make us smarter, when it has actually allowed ignorance to spread faster than ever before.

For many people, the intelligent world envisaged in that iPad commercial is in reality a world dominated by two things – conspiratorial nonsense and hardcore porn. If you care about the ongoing viability of the planet, it is a mistake to disregard this as merely a bit of harmless weirdness you can simply ignore. This is because it has the ability to change public policy and affect public safety.

The Christchurch massacre is a case in point, a terrorist act that has been described in many quarters online as a so-called “false flag attack”, that is, a staged event aimed at achieving a covert political outcome.

In the case of Christchurch, white supremacists argue the massacre was orchestrated to discredit the right; conversely, some gun control opponents are asserting, as per Pauline Hanson with Port Arthur, that the entire thing may well have been staged in a bid to disarm the people of New Zealand.

Some card-carrying lunatics have even suggested Islamists may have been behind it all in a bid to disarm the Kiwi populace enabling a future Islamic takeover.

The cliche holds that you can’t make this stuff up, but the problem is, you can, and not only that, you can present it in a way that looks intellectually credible to the feeble of mind. The most disturbing – and successful – example of this trend is in the field of vaccinations. One of the greatest achievements of science is under threat as communities lose their herd immunity courtesy of anti-vaxxers who lead rich and stupid lives online.

We are now seeing the return of diseases such as measles that were presumed to be dead in this country; and we have seen innocent kids in childcare centres killed by manageable conditions such as whooping cough, all through the conceit and stupidity of parents who snub their noses at centuries of science because they’ve been up all night reading some website.

While I’m not generally a fan of violence, there was a wonderful moment a few years back when moon landing astronaut Buzz Aldrin was bailed out upside down in a conference in the US by a fellow called Bart Sibrel.

Sibrel had been hounding Aldrin for years and had even gone to the trouble of making an absurd documentary claiming the moon landing was a hoax.

On this day he confronted Aldrin and started shouting abuse at him, calling him a liar and a fraud, demanding he come clean about what really happened and admit the whole thing was filmed on some Hollywood lot. After initially trying to sidestep him, Buzz decided on a more direct path of attack, and punched Sibrel square in the face. While not advocating his methods, Buzz is right. This stuff has to be fought.

As the father of web-obsessed teenage kids, it strikes me as especially pernicious given the preponderance of YouTubers with huge cult followings who do nothing more than explore and recount so-called conspiracies through history.

And in the political space – as I’m depressingly sure the comments section of this article will attest – what does it say when an elected politician can openly question the most galvanising and tragic moment in the history of Australian public policy, and be held up by her deluded supporters not as the discredited peddler of conspiracy theories, but the victim of a conspiracy herself.