

## No Hoax: Fighting COVID-19 has meant tackling conspiracy theories, even within families

  
**By Stewart Bell · Global News**February 27, 2021 |  15 min read

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## Health officials urge Canadians to break the pandemic misinf...

***WATCH:** A year into the global pandemic, misinformation about COVID-19 has health officials increasingly concerned. Misinformation, conspiracies and hoaxes are now impacting public health responses creating confusion and distrust, and as Jeff Semple discovered, it's even breaking some families apart.*

It was bad enough when Jacqueline Jacob's aunt started posting on Facebook about the "plandemic." But then came the emails about it, and Jacob had to cut her off.

COVID-19 was all a "scam," according to a poster the aunt put on Facebook. Lockdowns, masks and vaccines, meanwhile, were stages of a "12 step plan to create a totalitarian New World Order."

"This isn't about our health. It's about global control," she wrote.

“It’s getting out of hand,” Jacob said. “It’s hard for our family to deal with.”

A year into the global pandemic, [misinformation](#) about COVID-19 has become inescapable.

The frustrations and isolation of life under [lockdown](#), and idle time spent online, have become pathways to a thriving genre of conspiracy culture that claims to see a hidden hand behind COVID-19.

The result is a [growing concern](#) about the muddying of the waters of public health at a time Canadians need clarity if they are to put the pandemic behind them as quickly as possible.



*Dr. Joy Hataley, right, said misinformation has left Canadians confused.*

“Everyone’s confused,” Dr. Joy Hataley said.

opponent of Ontario's lockdown.

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“She was upset because her patients were coming in and they were all discombobulated. They didn’t know what to believe about the pandemic,” said Hataley, the district chair of the [Ontario Medical Association](#).

“They didn’t know if it was true that they should mask, if they should just continue their normal lives, if they should push the limits by walking into businesses *en masse*, just to prove that COVID wasn’t a thing.”

Even Hataley’s own father asked her about a video, sent to him by someone at his church, asserting that tracking devices were being planted into those who received the COVID-19 vaccine.

She blamed opportunists for taking advantage of the fearful and vulnerable, but she also said a communications failure had left an opening for misinformation.

“If I was going to fault one thing in our response to the pandemic, it would be the lack of a decisive, strong, inspiring voice,” she said.



“We don’t have that.”



*Protesters outside the office of B.C.'s provincial health officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry, Jan. 30, 2021.  
Stewart Bell/Global News*

Ready to fill the void were the ill-informed and conspiratorial, social media personalities, far-right, anti-government and anti-vaccine groups, and a handful of authoritarian foreign governments.

Using online platforms, they tainted public discussion with misinterpretations, outright fabrications and false or, at a minimum, out-of-context research and statistics presented as hidden truths.

The flood of misinformation is “hampering public health responses, creating confusion and distrust, and ultimately, making it more difficult for people to make vital decisions about their health and safety,” said Dr. Theresa Tam.



media companies hosting it.

She also told Canadians to “speak empathetically with friends and family members about why something is untrue and share sources of accurate information instead.”

But that’s not always so easy, according to several Canadians who spoke to Global News about their struggles with friends and family who had fallen for COVID-19 conspiracy theories.



*A Quebec woman, seen here from behind, told Global News how her mother fell into COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Global News*

## Dividing families, feeding doubts and exasperating Canadians

In Quebec, a woman described how her mother had turned to Facebook out of lockdown boredom. Before long, she was proclaiming COVID-19 part of an



“COVID denialism” became a gateway to conspiracy theories about the New World Order, Donald Trump and [QAnon](#), whose followers were among those who stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

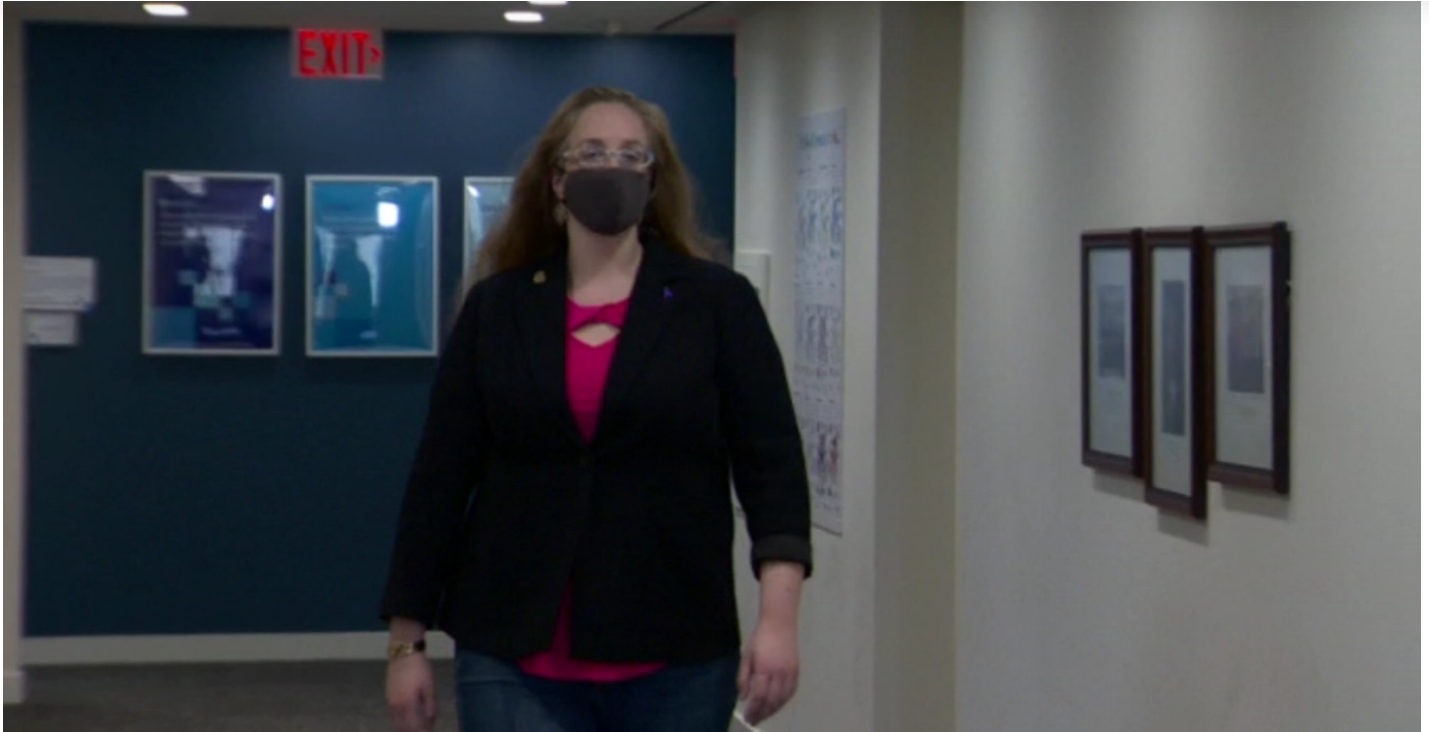
An entrepreneur with her own business in the long-term care industry, her mother was convinced Trump won the U.S. election but that satellites changed the votes. She began talking about World War 3. She attended anti-lockdown rallies, and confronted her daughter about vaccines.

“Conspiracy theory really gives you an easy explanation for everything. It’s the answer to all your problems,” the daughter said. “It’s something that’s easy to grab and that has not necessarily any nuances. The science is complicated.”

She no longer recognizes her mother, she said.

“It’s not logic, it’s emotion,” said the woman, who spoke on the condition she would not be identified because she lives with her mother. “It’s a mix of boredom and the stress and fear, and she felt alone.”





*Dr. Samantha Hill, president of the Ontario Medical Association. Global News*

Rejecting or downplaying the pandemic is partly a psychological crutch, easier to face than the stark truth: that a stubborn, deadly virus has circled the world, said Dr. Samantha Hill, the OMA president.

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Conspiracy memes give people a focus for their anger and angst, she said. Among their targets: international organizations, governments, corporate elites, health



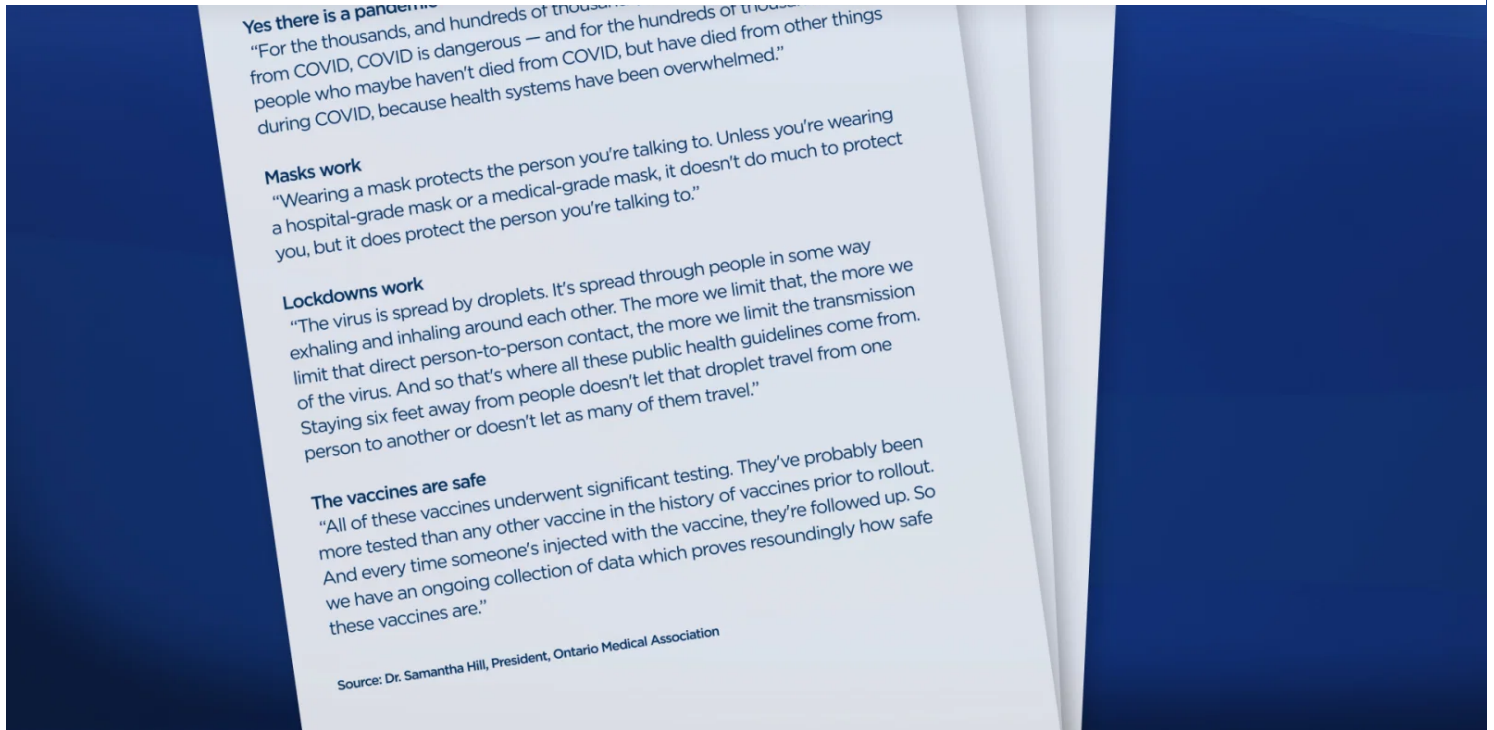
You can't yell at a virus.

Hill also sees COVID-19 denial as a form of privilege. Only those lucky enough to have been spared a “firsthand reason to believe it to be true,” could not appreciate what is going on, she said.

While conspiracies about UFOs might be harmless entertainment, COVID misinformation is feeding doubts, which can lead to problems like reluctance to vaccinate, heightening the risks for everyone and threatening to prolong the pandemic.

Hill said Canadians should trust their doctors.

“If your family doctor is prepared to stand in front of you and tell you that this is a safe vaccine, and that this is a big illness, and that you have a part to play in shutting this illness down and getting Ontario back to normal, I think we can all believe that one trusted person in our life — a lot more than some social media person we’ve never met, who we can’t have any guarantee of their intent, or of their research,” she said.



*Global News asked Dr. Samantha Hill, president of the Ontario Medical Association, to address the key types of pandemic misinformation doctors are encountering.*

Doctors are hardly the only ones growing weary of COVID-19 truthers.

Following the Jan. 21 death of [Yassin Dabeh](#), an Ontario care home worker who contracted COVID-19, his father had to ask conspiracy theorists to “stop spreading lies” about his son after they became obsessed with the case.

In Quebec, police allegedly seized a cache of firearms from [Raymond Tetu](#), who news reports linked to social media accounts that termed COVID-19 a “scamdemic” and spoke of shooting police officers enforcing lockdown orders.

During an online broadcast with Alberta’s chief medical officer on Feb. 3, [Premier Jason Kenney](#) took the time to confront conspiracy theorists, explaining that COVID-19 was not a plot by globalists.

“It’s not QAnon, it’s not a conspiracy. It’s reality,” he said, looking partly amused and partly fed up.



But following the arrest of the pastor at [GraceLife Church](#) near Edmonton for allegedly contravening public health restrictions, Kenney faced renewed criticism online, some of it from those insisting there was no pandemic in the province and it was a plot by a globalist “cabal.”

**READ MORE:** [Concern grows as anti-maskers target B.C. workers enforcing COVID-19 rules](#)

Public health officials, meanwhile, are receiving [death threats](#), retail workers are being confronted by protesters asserting the right to shop without masks, and anti-lockdown demonstrations have become weekly events in cities across the country.

“COVID is a hoax,” read a placard held by a maskless demonstrator at a Jan. 30 rally outside the Victoria office of British Columbia’s chief medical officer, Dr. Bonnie Henry.

The event was advertised as a “freedom” rally on the website of a group called Action4Canada.

“I’m not a paranoid person,” said one of the protesters. She went on to describe COVID-19 as a part of a plan to destroy Canada’s economy and install a “one world government.”

“They planned this for a while,” she said. “It’s a conspiracy but it’s not a theory, it’s happening.”

Too distrustful of the press to give her name, she handed over an information sheet bearing the logo of Vaccine Choice Canada. It described a fascist scheme “to control every aspect of our lives with complete economic control.”



**Lijian Zhao 赵立坚** ✓

@zlj517

China government official





of us. Please read and retweet it. COVID-19: Further Evidence that the Virus Originated in the US.

[globalresearch.ca/covid-19-furth...](https://globalresearch.ca/covid-19-furth...)



Get the facts about COVID-19

6:02 PM · Mar 12, 2020 · Twitter Web App

*China's foreign ministry spokesperson, seen here tweeting a post from a Montreal-based website the U.S. has linked to Russia's disinformation "ecosystem."*

## Who is behind COVID misinformation?

Behind the "infodemic" are groups like the Montreal-based Centre for Research on Globalization, which a [U.S. State Department report](#) described as "deeply enmeshed" in Russia's "disinformation and propaganda ecosystem."

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Posts on the group's website have been circulated by Vaccine Choice Canada, which did not respond to questions about the matter.





conspiracy publication.”

The article the Chinese official encouraged his followers to read “promotes several conspiracy theories suggesting that the virus originated in a U.S. biological warfare lab, and that the pandemic is not real and is actually a cover operation by the One World Order,” CSIS wrote in a report.

The media arms of China’s communist party have also promoted false allegations that COVID-19 was created in a U.S. bioweapons lab, and that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine approved by Canada is deadly.

“We’ve picked up the Chinese, basically spreading falsehoods about Western vaccines, that they can’t be trusted,” said Kyle Matthews, a founder of the [Canadian Coalition to Counter COVID Digital Disinformation](#).

“We’ve seen Russian disinformation, some coming from Iran.”

Launched last year, and funded by the federal government, the coalition has been working with the firm Nexalogy to study how disinformation has made its way into COVID-19 discussions.

Its findings on the involvement of China, Russia and Iran are consistent with those reported by CSIS, which also named the three governments as sources of COVID disinformation.

**READ MORE:** [CSIS accuses Russia, China and Iran of spreading COVID-19 disinformation](#)

Neo-Nazis, white supremacists and anti-government extremists have similarly seized on the pandemic “to promote disinformation and alternative narratives,” CSIS wrote in [documents obtained by Global News](#).



misinformed Canadians, but also foreign governments that are doing this in order to weaken our social cohesion,” said Matthews, executive director of the Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies at Concordia University.

The regimes sometimes use their state-controlled media to spread COVID-19 misinformation, in an attempt to “sow confusion and to sow doubt and really bring about a distrust in our democratic institutions.”

“This is a human rights issue,” he added. “We cannot allow foreign governments and others to spread false information that can impact the lives of Canadians. We have over 20,000 deaths. If we don’t get hold of the infodemic, it could be many more than that.”

The biggest concern at this stage of the pandemic is the impact of misinformation on the willingness of Canadians to vaccinate.

A study by [Advanced Symbolics Inc.](#), conducted for the OMA, found that vaccine doubt was highest among those 25 to 34 years old, who were more open to believing that COVID-19 was a “genetically engineered virus” and that vaccines came with a “mandatory health tag.”



*A selection of social media posts on COVID-19.*

## The role of Big Tech

The pandemic is “fake.” The COVID-19 virus is a “computer simulation.” Deaths attributed to COVID-19 are “fake.” The pandemic is a plot to “reset global order.” The vaccine is “fake.”

All these falsehoods were circulated on social media, where COVID-19 misinformation is pervasive.

Twitter hashtags depicting COVID-19 as a hoax appeared almost 5,000 times in Canadian-focused discussions between Jan. 23 and Feb. 16, according to an analysis by Nexalogy.

The most active spreader was @kidkool4u, which has been restricted for “unusual activity” but can still be accessed.

Kid Kool did not respond to a request for comment, nor did Twitter.

At Amazon, shoppers can buy “The Coronavirus is a Hoax” face masks, “Stop the Plandemic” hats, and copies of a book that calls COVID-19 a plot to depopulate the planet. The company could not be reached for comment.

To finance their activities, Canadian groups accused of spreading COVID-19 misinformation are using online platforms to sell merchandise and collect donations.

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The Centre for Research on Globalization fundraises using Donorbox. “We will certainly look into this,” the company said when asked to comment. “We take violations of our terms of service very seriously.”

Action4Canada, whose website claims COVID-19 is part of an “agenda” “to usher in the Great Reset,” and describes the vaccine as “harmful and deadly,” was using PayPal to raise money for a law suit against the B.C. and federal governments.

But after Global News asked PayPal to comment, its account was taken down. PayPal said it regularly assessed “activity against our acceptable use policy and carefully

The founder of Action4Canada denied spreading misinformation.

“The public health officials should be the ones concerned about the part they are playing in spreading misinformation about so called Covid-19 and the irreparable harm they are causing Canadians,” Tanya Gaw said.

A Facebook spokesperson said the company had removed over 12 million posts from Facebook and Instagram between March and October 2020 on the grounds they were COVID-19 misinformation that could cause “imminent physical harm.”

The company is also working with the Public Health Agency of Canada to flag misinformation and direct users to credible sources of information about COVID-19, the Facebook spokesperson said.

“We’ve connected over 2 billion people to resources from health authorities, including the Public Health Agency of Canada, through our [COVID-19 Information Center](#),” the spokesperson said.





*Police at Toronto's Adamson Barbecue after the restaurant allegedly defied pandemic lockdown orders, Nov. 25, 2020. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Nathan Denette*

GoFundMe said it took reports of misinformation seriously and that fundraising to promote misinformation about COVID-19 breached its terms of service.

But a [fundraiser on the platform](#) gathered more than \$300,000 in pledges for the legal defence of Adam Skelly, the owner of Adamson Barbecue, who was arrested for allegedly defying Toronto's lockdown.

The unlicensed restaurant became a hub for anti-lockdown activists last year, but Global News has learned it is also receiving pandemic wage subsidies from the federal government.

In an email, Skelly called the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) "a small part of the globalist agenda to crash the currencies of Western countries by endlessly

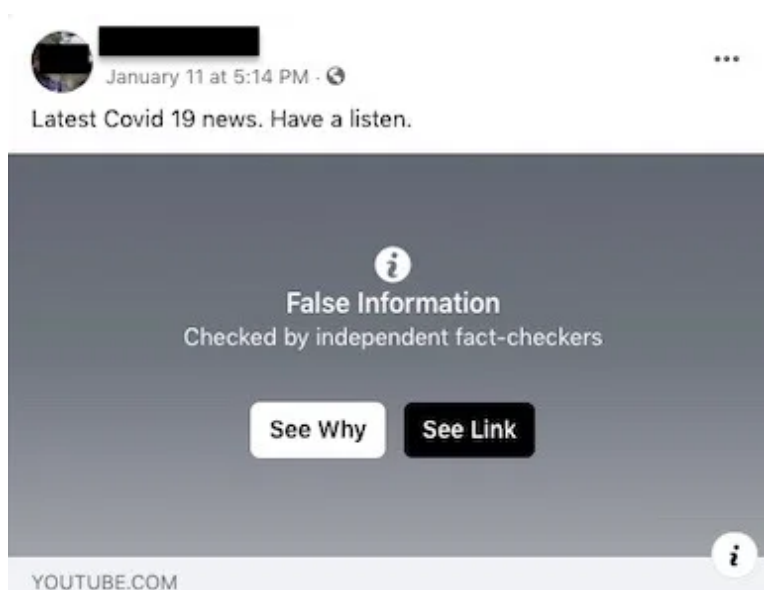
But he acknowledged he was a recipient of funding through the program.

“My company’s still going to go out of business, but this is softening the fall and allowing me to keep some people employed a little bit longer,” he told Global News in an interview. He also disputed he needed a licence.

A spokesperson for the City of Toronto confirmed the restaurant had no business licence but referred questions about the CEWS to the federal government, which would not discuss recipients of the program’s funding.

“Municipal Licensing & Standards has laid several charges for operating without a licence and has issued a further warning letter,” said Andrea Gonsalves, the City of Toronto spokesperson.

The city is seeking to recover the costs of enforcing the lockdown on the restaurant, and has sent Skelly a summary of expenses totaling more than \$187,000, she said.



*Misinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine on the Facebook page of a Toronto elementary school teacher.*

## An elementary teacher convinced there is no pandemic



and the manufacturers of the “cure” were murdered because they “stood in the way of Trudeau’s agenda.”

She is also a teacher at a Toronto elementary school.

The Toronto District School Board said the teacher was on leave and had not been in the classroom during the current school year, but it was investigating.

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“We strongly disagree with her alleged views on masking and other pandemic safety measures as they are not in line with the science-based measures the TDSB, together with Toronto Public Health, has in place,” TDSB spokesperson Ryan Bird said.

Waterloo University Prof. Carmen Celistini, who studies conspiracy theories, said the fears and restrictions of the pandemic had led some to explore alternative explanations, where they had been drawn into conspiracy narratives.

“And because there’s a sense of distrust in the institutions that would normally provide that information, they’re turning to these alternative things,” said Celistini, a fellow at the Centre for Hate, Bias and Extremism.





uneducated or people who are on the lowest end of the socioeconomic tiers.”

“It’s people everywhere.”

Before the pandemic, the teacher at Toronto’s Crescent Town Elementary School was posting about vegan baking and Bon Jovi.

But then last year, her Facebook page showed her in an I Support Trump banner.

“Starting to understand why government buildings are being stormed worldwide,” read a post on her Facebook, 10 days after the siege at the U.S Capitol. “People have had enough of their corrupt bulls–t.”

“The government is at war with its peoples. We must physically remove this ilk from the ivory towers they reside and claim our sovereignty,” another post read.

On Jan. 29, she was part a small group that gathered in a parking lot outside a Toronto Longo’s grocery store.

Cell phones raised, they followed a social media personality charged with hate crimes in 2017 into the store to protest the retailer’s mask requirement. They left after handing a manager what they said was a lawsuit.

Longo’s declined to comment.

Some of the teacher’s online posts have been flagged by Facebook as false information or altered photos.

The Facebook page of Jacob’s aunt has faced similar fact-checking.

Jacob said her aunts had stopped messaging her since she confronted them. But they’re still trying to convert her mother, and the ordeal has divided the family, she



“It’s sad.”

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