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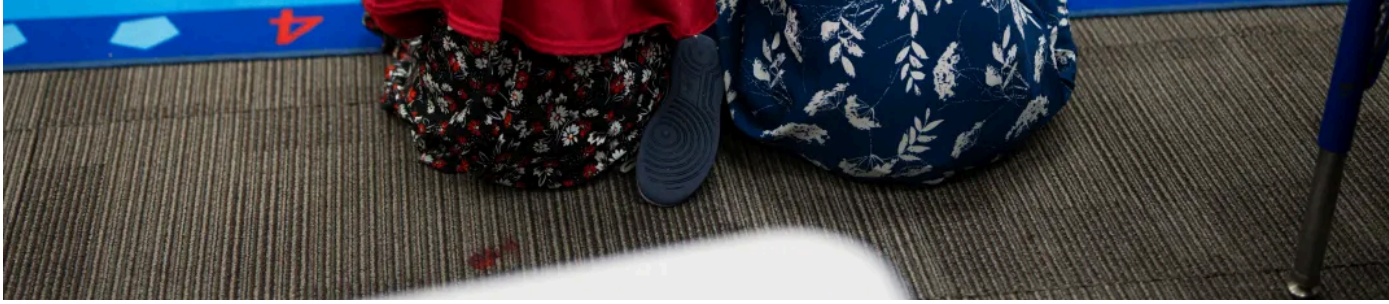
## How right-wing creators bend reality to their will

How a scandal about day cares run by Somali Americans led to an ICE surge in Minneapolis.

by **Caitlin Dewey**

Jan 9, 2026, 6:45 AM EST





Children read at ABC Learning Center Inc. in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on December 30, 2025. The daycare was featured in a viral video claiming there were no children present, but it actually just didn't allow the YouTuber into the building. Renee Jones Schneider/Minnesota Star Tribune via Getty Images

*This story appeared in [Today, Explained](#), a daily newsletter that helps you understand the most compelling news and stories of the day. [Subscribe here](#).*

The video opens with a question and a slamming door. Nick Shirley, the 23-year-old right-wing content creator who rose to sudden infamy and influence last week, confronts two Somali women as the camera rolls.

“Hello, we’d like to ask where the money is going,” Shirley says as the women scramble away. It’s a scene that repeats again and again throughout his wildly viral [43-minute video](#) — published to YouTube on December 26 — that purports to “investigate” widespread fraud in Minnesota’s publicly funded daycare centers.

Issues in the program were already well-known. But the video, with its 3.4 million views, kicked off a wider national scandal. The federal government promptly [froze child care payments](#) to the state. On Monday, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz abruptly [dropped](#) his reelection campaign. The Trump administration also surged hundreds of ICE agents to the Minneapolis area as part of a major enforcement action that left one woman dead.

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Since Shirley’s video came out, copycats have descended on daycare centers across the country, eager to capitalize on the unprecedented attention they’ve received from both the public and the Trump administration.

For a growing class of right-wing news influencers, the Minnesota fraud scandal represents a major coup: “I ENDED TIM WALZ,” Shirley gloated earlier this week. But what does their rising power mean for politics, news, and the quaint concept of consensus reality?

## **A watershed moment for right-wing creators**

Nick Shirley is one of a growing cast of viral, quasi-journalistic posters “just asking questions” on YouTube, TikTok, and X. As a genre, these videos cater to the incentives and biases of the attention economy, hacking complex issues into slick montages, sound bites, and reactions. They also frequently adopt the aesthetic trappings of conventional journalism — man-on-the-street interviews, live-at-5-style narration — without actually adhering to norms like independence, transparency, or balance.

This type of figure has existed since the social web gave every wannabe Woodward a platform. But the rapid collapse of trust in media, the new dominance of algorithmic platforms, and a second, emboldened Trump administration ushered in a new era for citizen media. Right-wing creators now sit in the White House press corps and attend high-profile White House events. Their posts are regularly shared by the likes of Vice President JD Vance, FBI director Kash Patel, and — of course — President Donald Trump himself.

Trump has historically and famously favored mainstream conservative media, like Fox News. But he's increasingly leveraged the incendiary, attention-grabbing work of sympathetic creators to justify his policy moves. This is essentially what propaganda looks like in 2026, said Jay Caspian Kang, a columnist for the New Yorker who frequently covers politics and the media.

“You can pick any type of political argument you want, and you can find somebody who is presumably independent who is making that argument,” Kang told Vox's Noel King. “All you kind of have to do is point them to that person and be like, ‘Hey, here's just a guy who's saying something. We're not influencing him. He's just a guy out there figuring this stuff out. And then that person becomes, in some ways, an authentic and pure version that doesn't feel like propaganda.’”

Before Minnesota, that dynamic played out most clearly in Portland, Oregon, where Trump used misleading and selectively edited footage of last fall’s anti-ICE protests to justify a full-scale National Guard deployment.

As my colleague Cameron Peters wrote at the time, the deployment addressed “a completely made-up set of facts, contrary to the wishes” of city leaders. But you wouldn’t know that from videos like “Portland has Fallen... ANTIFA Take Control of City,” a Nick Shirley production that later earned him an invite to a White House roundtable.

Shirley’s blockbuster video on Minnesota’s fraud scandal takes a similarly urgent tone. To be clear, no one disputes that fraud has long vexed Minnesota’s social programs. “This is a story that we’ve been covering for years now,” said Max Nesterak, the deputy editor of the Minnesota Reformer, an independent, nonprofit news outlet.

Unlike the reporting of Nesterak and his colleagues, however — or the multiple, ongoing, much-publicized state and federal investigations that have netted more than 50 fraud convictions since 2022 — Shirley’s video was splashy. Dramatic. A spectacle tailor-made for YouTube.

Shirley visited almost a dozen daycare centers and confronted staff about fraud in Minnesota’s public child care program, sometimes asking to see the kids on-site or to come inside without an appointment. He interpreted any refusal as proof of malfeasance, which later reporting has not backed up: State officials and local media who have since visited the daycares found they were operating as normal.

But to many viewers, it hardly mattered that footage of closed child care centers or uncomfortable workers did not constitute incontrovertible evidence of fraud. “This

dude has done far more useful journalism than any of the winners of the 2024 [@pulitzercenter](#) prizes,” wrote JD Vance, in a December 27 [post](#) to X.

Sure enough, as in Portland, the Trump administration put Shirley’s video to immediate and remarkable use. In the days after Christmas, it instituted funding freezes and new reporting rules that could [disrupt child care programs nationwide](#), Vox’s Anna North reports. The federal government also surged hundreds of ICE agents and other law enforcement officers to Minneapolis this week as part of an immigration crackdown tied to allegations of fraud.

On Wednesday, one of those ICE agents shot and killed 37-year-old Renee Good as several bystanders looked on. And the cycle is already continuing: Eyewitness videos of that shooting have since become fodder for other right-wing content creators, some of whom also style themselves as journalists or documentarians.

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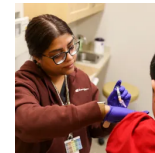


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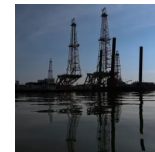


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