

Behind the Somali daycare panic is a mother-and-son duo angling to be top Maga influencers

www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/jan/10/nick-brooke-shirley-maga-influencer

<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/wilson-jason>

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Nick Shirley speaks during a roundtable discussion at the White House on 8 October 2025. Photograph: Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images

Nick and Brooke Shirley have for years published conspiracy-minded takes on hot-button rightwing issues

YouTube influencer Nick Shirley, whose viral video alleging fraud by daycare centers servicing [Minneapolis's](#) Somali American community came days ahead of the Trump administration's declaration of [a national funding freeze](#), has for years published conspiracy-minded takes on hot-button rightwing issues.

He also has close ties to the White House, [Republicans](#), and to representatives of an earlier generation of rightwing partisan "[ambush journalists](#)" such as [James O'Keefe](#). He worked with Minnesota Republicans to produce the viral video on Somali-run daycares.

Shirley has collaborated closely with his mother and fellow influencer Brooke Shirley, with the pair traveling together to flashpoints elevated by rightwing discourse online and in conservative media, and publishing across platforms including TikTok and [YouTube](#).

Their US destinations have included the southern border, [Portland](#), Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, but they have also traveled overseas for big-ticket rightwing and anti-immigrant events including the Tommy Robinson-organized “Unite the Kingdom” rally last September.

Shirley’s videos frequently sensationalize conflict, or focus on street violence. The titles of recent videos include [Dearborn Michigan has Fallen... Christians and Muslims Battle](#), [Portland has Fallen... ANTIFA has Taken Control of City](#), and [I Confronted Dangerous Migrant Scammers in NYC | Canal Street](#), the latter of which highlights a physical confrontation between Shirley and a street vendor in New York.

Shirley’s 26 December video, which targeted Minnesota’s Somali community with allegations of widespread fraud, [became the basis](#) for a torrent of anti-immigrant and anti-Somali content across social media, including in Truth Social posts by Donald Trump.

Follow-up reporting by local outlets including [CBS Minnesota](#) and the [Minnesota Star-Tribune](#), has found little factual basis for Shirley’s claims that daycare centers were claiming federal funding without caring for any children.

[More than 90 people in Minnesota](#) have been charged since 2022 in a \$250m Covid-19 relief fraud scheme involving a non-profit that falsely claimed to provide meals to children, and a federal prosecutor estimated that \$9bn or more in federal funds across 14 state programs may have been stolen since 2018.

But [no fraud charges have been filed against the daycare centers featured by Shirley](#), though state records show some had code violations unrelated to fraud

Shirley’s latest video was the culmination of a years-long, peripatetic effort by the mother-and-son pairing to entrench themselves at the head of a burgeoning milieu of Maga-verse content creators.

Brooke Shirley, 55, has posted hundreds of videos to her TikTok account beginning just two weeks after the January 6 protests at the United States Capitol, which Nick Shirley [filmed himself attending](#).

She has also publicly defended the veracity of her son’s work. In [November she told the Columbia Journalism Review](#) (CJR) that “what Nick is doing is journalism”, adding: “He’s documenting what is going on in America and in the world. And independent journalists are the ones that are out there.”

They also have a shared self-perception as truth-telling citizen journalists.

The Guardian contacted Brooke Shirley for comment via voice and text message on a cellphone number identified as an active connection in her name by several data brokers. Nick Shirley was contacted for comment via the contact email listed on his YouTube page, and which he has invited people to send tips on in the description field of his videos.

Neither responded.

[Petros Iosifidos](#), professor of media and communications policy at City St George's, University of London, and the co-author of the 2021 book [Digital Democracy, Social Media and Disinformation](#), said: "Such a usage of social media does not aid democratic representation and instead contributes to a greater destabilisation of modern politics.

He added, "The situation has worsened in more recent years with widespread mis/disinformation that deprives the public of their fundamental right to have access to reliable, accurate information so to make informed decisions."

Nick Shirley's very good year

Nick Shirley has emerged in the last two years as one of a new crop of news influencers who achieved a new level of salience at the tail end of the Biden years and have been actively cultivated by Trump's White House.

Shirley was [one of the invitees](#) to a White House [Antifa roundtable](#) in October, at which influencers and administration officials aired their grievances about the amorphous social movement that has served as a Maga target since Trump's first presidency.

Shirley dutifully [posted a video of his speech at the event](#) on his YouTube channel.

By then, Shirley was riding high on the basis of a previous viral yarn, after he was [one of the first influencers](#) to post alarmist videos about immigrant vendors on New York's Canal Street.

[Reportedly](#), the attention from Shirley and other news influencers such as Savannah Hernandez led to an Ice sweep of the vendors, which was met by resistance from New York residents, and earned a rebuke from Zohran Mamdani, then a mayoral candidate, who called the tactics "aggressive and reckless".

[One media report](#) quoted a resident of the Chinatown district where the vendors have been located for decades as saying that Ice "just take advantage of this because suddenly the rightwing media and online influencers came down into the area".

In November, Shirley was [awarded](#) the "citizen journalist of the year" at the Citizen Journalism Gala held [at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate](#), and [hosted by](#) James O'Keefe.

The month after the Mar-a-Lago ceremony, Shirley was collaborating with Minnesota [Republicans](#) to put the issue of purported fraud in the state's Somali immigrant community on the national agenda.

On 29 December, House Republican leaders held a press conference in the wake of his videos.

At that conference, Lisa DeMuth not only backed the veracity of the video, telling reporters: "By now, everyone has seen the viral video that in under an hour exposed more than a million dollars in fraud."

She also added: "Our caucus has been working to expose fraud for years, including working with Nick Shirley and agency whistleblowers to get the information out to the public and to hold the Walz administration accountable."

The Guardian emailed DeMuth to ask for specifics on the collaboration, and whether the [apparent](#) inaccuracies [unveiled](#) by subsequent reporting were Shirley's alone, or as a result of information provided by the caucus.

A spokesperson referred to a man who appears prominently in the video, referred to only as "David" by Shirley, but who was [later identified by the Minnesota Star-Tribune](#) as David Hoch, a Minnesotan whose several paid political campaigns included an incident in which he campaigned "in nothing but shorts and a sandwich board on Minneapolis' Nicollet Mall".

They wrote: "Some of the information they used, including daycare locations, CCAP numbers, violations, etc, was given to David by caucus staff who found it in the official DHS licensing database and other publicly available sources."

Double act

Shirley [reportedly](#) built his channel with shock and prank videos in the late teens, while he was still a high school student. After graduating in 2020, Shirley, a Mormon, took a hiatus during 2021 and 2022 while he completed a religiously ordained mission.

After he returned from his mission in 2023, according to NPR, Shirley's content took on a more sharply political and partisan character.

Per Columbia Journalism Review reporting, this pivot was [encouraged by Brooke](#): "It was Brooke – who was a former journalism student and a content creator herself – who pushed her son to cover the southern border," the topic of several Nick Shirley videos in 2023.

Brooke Shirley not only encouraged her son to make such content, but arguably led the way for him, having published pro-Maga content to TikTok since late January 2021, according to a Guardian review of the account.

She has also been closely involved in his work. In his acceptance speech at Mar-a-Lago, according to CJR, he thanked Brooke “for filming many of his videos”.

Each has registered companies that appear to be related to their public output.

According to Utah company records, Shirley was the organizer of Honey Badger LLC, whose purpose was “online media and related activities”, which was registered in April 2024 and administratively dissolved on 21 September 2025. Brooke Shirley, meanwhile, is the organizer of BT Outlook LLC, whose purpose is “social media and related activities”, which was incorporated on 30 September 2024.

Both companies were registered at the same residential address in suburban Farmington, Utah. It’s not known if BT Outlook LLC is the underlying entity for the pair’s news influencer activities.

While Nick Shirley promotes his YouTube channel as being “here to entertain and bring the truth to all”, on Brooke’s TikTok account, which at the time of reporting had more than 290,000 followers, Brooke describes herself as a “boots on the ground Citizen Journalist!”, adding, “follow me for true news!”.

Roving reporters

Brooke’s boots frequently tread the same ground as Nick’s.

The pair’s video output indicates that they travel to the same places that have been the focus of conservative media and social media, and produce often-inflammatory content that reinforces conspiracy narratives about locales, individuals and groups that have been demonized in rightwing discourse.

Nick Shirley’s videos are usually longer, more complex, and more intensively edited than his mother’s, but the pair often cover the same ground.

On 28 October, for example, Nick Shirley [published a video](#) on YouTube which purported to offer an account of events on the ground in Portland, Oregon. His video played up stereotypes of the city which have emerged during the Trump era, focusing on homeless encampments, and scuffles outside the city’s ICE facility, which has been a focus for protesters and counter-protesters since the summer, and attracted a Trump-ordered national guard deployment, which has since ended after the supreme court judged it unconstitutional.

In a section of the video Shirley entitled “ANTIFA receives a new shipment”, Shirley showed a U-Haul truck resupplying protesters with barbecue ingredients and inflatable animal costumes.

Between 12 and 16 October, Brooke Shirley published five TikTok videos shot in the city. In [one published on 17 October](#), Shirley features footage of the same costumes, groceries and charcoal grills highlighted by Nick in his longer YouTube video.

In the video, which features throughout a text insert reading “Antifa camp receives gear in Portland”, Brooke Shirley intones over footage of the set-up outside the ICE facility: “I’m in Portland, [Oregon](#), and I’m going to show you what the ICE facility looks like,” adding: “Right over there you can get inflatables to put on. There’s food to eat. There’s tents to take a nap in, I guess.”

Another of Brooke Shirley’s Portland videos published on 15 October is [focused on protesters wearing Tyrannosaurus rex costumes](#).

In that video, over footage of the blow-up theropods dancing with other protesters, Shirley asked viewers to “imagine if for 100 days this has been going on in front of your apartment complex. Because this has been going on for more than 100 days, 24/7”.

The same pattern repeats itself in the pair’s trips throughout the US and beyond to cover hot-button rightwing issues and events.

On 15 September, Nick Shirley posted video taken at the anti-immigrant Unite the Kingdom rally in London held two days earlier, where interviewees included a [woman in a Union Jack bikini](#), and a man with [severe facial contusions](#) who was later seen [confronting police officers](#).

The video also [heavily featured](#) the far-right activist and [convicted criminal](#) Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, better known as Tommy Robinson, who was one of the rally’s key organizers.

Shirley published a [separate sit-down interview](#) with Robinson.

Around the rally, Brooke Shirley published interviews with attenders who offered praise for [Donald Trump](#) and the recently assassinated [Charlie Kirk](#). The previous year, on a separate trip, Brooke Shirley published [her own interview with Tommy Robinson](#).

‘The Somalians are masters at fraud’

Following established practice, Brooke Shirley posted versions of the [Minnesota](#) story to her TikTok channel.

On 27 December, she [posted a video](#) captioned “The Somalians are masters at fraud and the government is dumb enough to allow it to continue to go on it. It’s easy to find the fraud. All you need to do is a little bit of research and visit the businesses. #minnesota #minneapolis”.

A text insert on the video, which shows Brooke Shirley standing outside a purportedly empty ABC Learning daycare center in [Minneapolis](#), reads: “Somalian-run Daycares all over Minnesota are closed yet collecting millions every year from the government.”

In the video, Brooke Shirley says: “This daycare right here, ran by Somalians, has taken in from the Minnesota government \$1.1m.”

Shirley adds: “This daycare says it can hold up to 40 children. I went up to the door. The door is locked, and as you can see, the windows are blacked out. I can’t hear any children inside this daycare.”

Shirley continues: “It’s midday right now. You’d think there’d be children in there playing, being taught, but no one is in there.”

Further on, she asserts: “The Somalians are robbing the taxpayers in Minnesota blind.”

Nick Shirley’s identical claims about ABC Learning Center have been refuted by multiple outlets, including CBS Minnesota, who found timestamped security footage of children arriving on the day they visited the facility, with reporters seeing children being cared for when they visited.

Brooke Shirley’s video had been viewed almost 360,000 times at the time of reporting.

In the past, Brooke Shirley has credited her son for her success on TikTok.

On 18 January 2025, following a brief TikTok shutdown arising from Biden-era legislation aimed at forcing the site’s Chinese parent company to divest, Shirley posted a video whose caption explicitly credited her son for her success on the platform.

“I am saying goodbye for a moment hopefully we will be back! Thank you my TikTok family and friends!” Shirley wrote, adding “Thank you to my amazing son @Nick Shirley for making my dreams come true here on TikTok!!”

The [accompanying video](#), soundtracked by Green Day’s Good Riddance (Time of Your Life), featured a montage of still images of Shirley interviewing migrants at the southern border and cities around the country, attending Trump rallies and student protests, and standing outside homeless encampments.

Despite persistent concerns about the quality of the information passed on by self-described “citizen journalists” like Shirley, [Pew research suggests](#) that one in five Americans regularly get news from social media content creators.