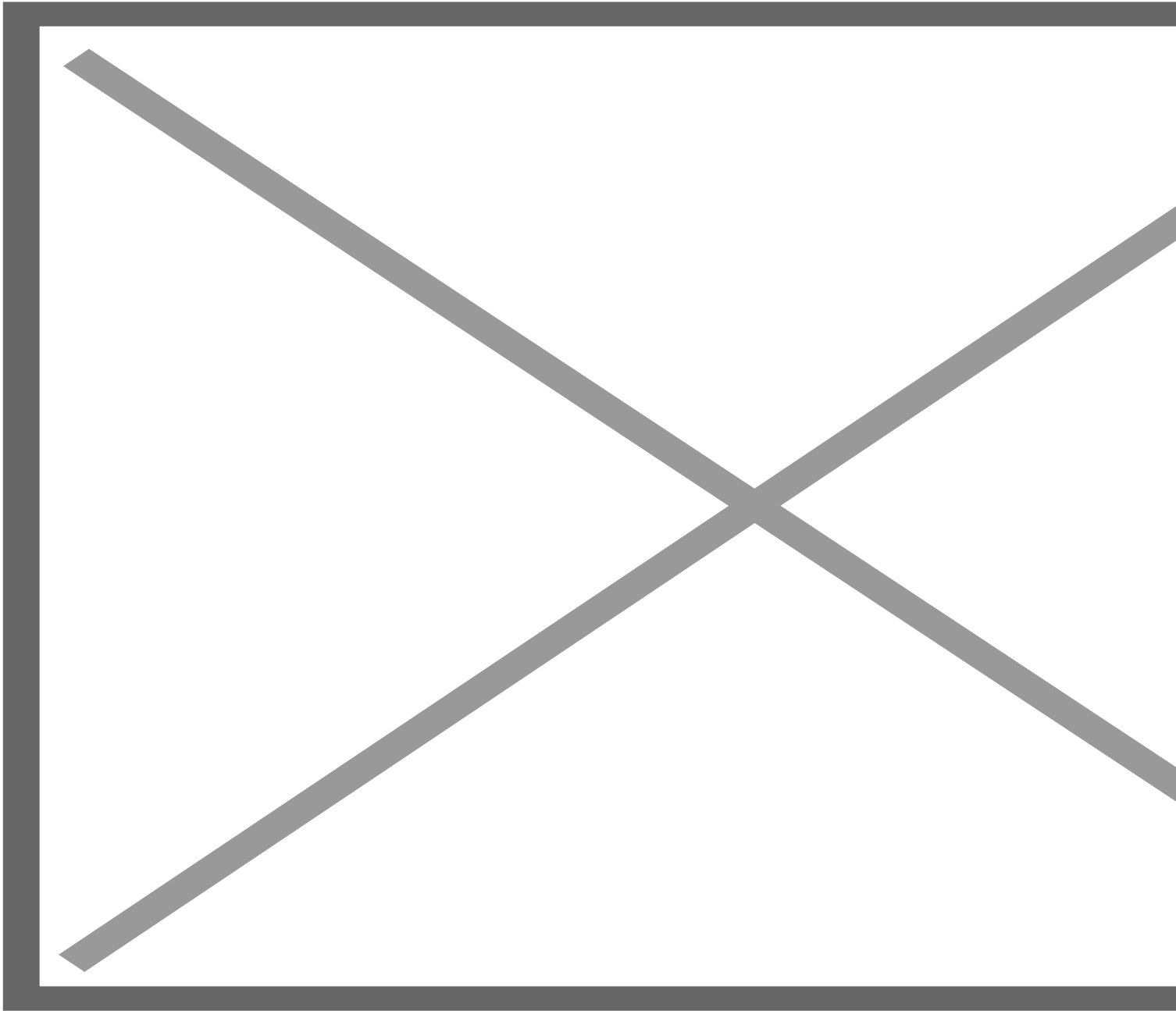


Believe your own eyes—and cultivate your moral perception

Kristi Noem lied to the public about Alex Pretti's death, and everyone could see it. But not everyone cared.

by [Brooklyne Oliveira](#) in the [June 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration (Source images: Getty)

“Believe your own eyes!”

The calls followed almost immediately after former secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem claimed that ICU nurse Alex Pretti was a domestic terrorist who approached federal agents in Minneapolis with a loaded gun in an effort to commit acts of violence. The problem was that there was video evidence that directly contradicted Noem. Pretti was holding his phone, not his gun, and he appeared to be assisting other protesters when he was tackled and shot in the back. Noem had lied to the American public, and everyone could see it.

Except not everyone cared. Almost immediately after Noem's statements, images circulated online allegedly showing Pretti dressed in drag (later debunked by the BBC). People claimed, falsely, that Pretti was a member of Antifa, which Donald Trump has labeled a terrorist organization, as well as that he had a mental illness. Putting aside the fact that these claims were extremely misguided attempts to slander Pretti, they were also verifiably false. How did they gain so much traction?

Throughout Trump's second term, [his administration has openly shared misleading and offensive AI-generated content](#) on social media. As such content has become more widespread, it has grown all the more difficult to distinguish authentic from fabricated content. This has made it even harder for our fractured society to agree on basic facts.

But this narrative about AI and disinformation only scratches the surface of the issue. The deeper story is about our moral perception: our capacity to see the truth for what it is. As I see it, the real tragedy is not that some people were fooled by false images and statements about Pretti but rather that they did not care that they were false.

Neither moral growth nor good moral judgment is possible when one lacks the requisite dispositions of humility, vigilance, and healthy skepticism that enable one to admit mistakes and correct false beliefs. Calls to "believe your own eyes" can do little for those who have no desire to see the truth in the first place. Disinformation, AI-generated or otherwise, is a symptom rather than a cause of a broader moral failing to cultivate virtue.

Aristotle describes virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice[s]" about how to respond appropriately in a given situation. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas writes that "in order to do good deeds, it matters not only what a man does, but also how he does it; to wit, *that he do it from right choice* and not merely from impulse or passion." In other words, how one decides on a particular course of action is just as important as the action one takes. For both Aristotle and Aquinas, there is a particular class of virtues, the "intellectual virtues," that aid in the kind of good decision making necessary for virtue. We can think of intellectual virtues as those that help us to see the morally relevant features of a situation, perhaps even including our own limitations and biases, and to make a good judgment about what to do.

Perhaps most importantly, intellectual virtues are concerned with truth. Good judgment rests upon good information, and sometimes good information is hard to come by. In the age of AI and disinformation, this problem is even more acute. It's no longer enough to believe your own eyes: you might need to interrogate not just what you see, but how you're seeing it, and that's going to require some intellectual virtue.

What might it mean to cultivate intellectual virtues that would better our moral perception? There is no easy answer to this question, but I think, minimally, it means fostering the capacity to admit our own faults. I don't have in mind a destructive self-deprecation but rather a humble recognition of our own limitations. As AI develops the capacity to generate increasingly realistic images and video, it seems inevitable that even very intelligent people will be fooled. Coming to terms with our own fallibility will go a long way in helping us to be more cautious about making swift judgements and more gracious when we or others make mistakes.

Vigilance and healthy skepticism have a part to play in this, too. Just because it is inevitable that people will be fooled by mistaken information does not mean that we ought to always excuse such mistakes. It may take

concerted, even constant, effort to prevent errant judgements in the age of disinformation, but it is an effort, I think, that we are all obligated to make if the truth is to hold any meaning. It is important not just that we are attentive to the world around us but that we are critically attentive—in such a way that we are able to recognize the truth when we are confronted by it.

This is not a problem that respects party or ideological lines. The moral trouble revealed in Minneapolis is trouble for us all, including those of us who recognized the horror of Pretti's death. When confronted with a video of Pretti shouting expletives and kicking in the taillight of an ICE vehicle just 11 days before he was killed, I suspected the video of being AI—because I wanted it to not be true. I was quick to disregard the video and even quicker to condemn those who shared it in their continued efforts to smear Pretti. Just like the folks who justified Pretti's killing because they decided, against the facts, that he deserved it, I decided that less-than-flattering depictions of Pretti couldn't be real. But my moral vision failed in that moment, and I reacted in anger and outrage. Had I been humble enough to stop for a moment to consider the truth of what I was seeing, I would not have made that mistake.

Pretti's kicking in a taillight is of course no justification for his death; there is no justification. But the problem remains the same. For calls to “believe your own eyes” to work, we need to become the kind of people with trustworthy vision. The challenge to become more virtuous observers remains open to us all.