

SCITECH

“O, learn to read what silent love hath writ: / To hear with eyes belongs to love’s fine wit.”
SONNET 23 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Internet-famous doctor gives talk on fighting misinformation

BY HARI VISWANATHAN
STAFF REPORTER

A doctor with 5.3 million Instagram followers spoke to a packed Marsh Lecture Hall on Tuesday evening for a talk titled “How to Debunk Misinformation in the Digital Age.”

In a conversation with Megan Ranney, the dean of the School of Public Health, Mike Varshavski — known to millions of followers worldwide as “Doctor Mike” — discussed misinformation in healthcare, and how he leverages his online presence to combat it. He reflected on shifting patterns of media consumption and the emerging challenges posed by the Trump administration and the rise of artificial intelligence.

“To be honest, I just wanted to prove people wrong,” Varshavski said, answering a question on how he began creating content.

The event opened with a short video recounting how his online rise began in 2015, when a selfie with his dog was featured in a BuzzFeed article and quickly went viral. Later that year, People magazine named him “the Sexiest Doctor Alive.”

Varshavski said he observed that while family medicine physicians were a ubiquitous presence in emergency rooms and nursing homes, they lacked a strong presence online. At the same time, he said he noticed patients falling victim to misinformation — buying misleading products such as “snake oil” remedies and developing distrust towards the healthcare system. In response, he began building a digital platform aimed at debunking such medical myths, he said.

He said that the nature of misinformation has shifted dramatically over the past five years. While Varshavski said he believes it is critical to call out false claims, he emphasized the importance of acknowledging when evidence is still evolving or when facts remain uncertain. He likened this to clinical practice: When a patient comes into the hospital with abdominal pain, there may be more than 20 potential diagnoses, and physicians must resist the urge to jump to premature conclusions.

Varshavski then turned to the public’s changing relationship with the media. Today, media consumption is fragmented, he said. Viewers are dispersed across different platforms, and there is no longer a unified show that everyone watches.

“We need to be everywhere,” Varshavski said. “And I think social media gives us that opportunity.”

One of his proudest moments, he said, was not a viral YouTube debate. Rather, it was his three-year run on a Fox Business show called “Mornings with Maria,” whose host was initially skeptical of the flu shot. After years of continued appearances and conversations, he ultimately persuaded the host to get a flu vaccine herself. The host later spoke publicly about its benefits and the absence of adverse effects.

Ranney then asked Doctor Mike about the techniques he uses to build trust among his followers online. Varshavski admitted that he was initially hesitant to share personal details because doing so was once considered unprofessional for physicians. Over time, however, he said he saw value in

selectively offering glimpses of his life, striking a balance that makes him appear more human and relatable without compromising professionalism.

“You’re not a robot in a white coat trying to convince them to do something they’re not trying to do,” Varshavski said.

Another key principle guiding his content decisions is avoiding the unintentional amplification of niche conspiracy theories or misinformation. He explained that with a large following, creators must be careful not to elevate false claims that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. While it can be tempting to publicly “dunk” on such posts, he cautioned that even a small percentage of viewers may believe them and responding can inadvertently give new visibility to a TikTok video that previously had few views.

When deciding what content to address, Varshavski explained that he prioritizes targeting intentional misinformation — claims that are deliberately spread to mislead people, he said.

“If someone’s an activist who’s making money by spreading misinformation, I’m dunking on them all day,” he said.

Varshavski also described being intrigued by the psychological and strategic aspects of growing his audience. For example, at times, he intentionally posts lighter — even silly videos — with the intention of having those videos go viral. By doing so, he said he increases the likelihood that his more substantive, educational content will later surface in viewers’ algorithms, since his earlier videos already appeared in their



COURTESY OF LEO TANG

As part of a School of Public Health speaker series, Mike Varshavski, better known as “Doctor Mike,” explained his rise in online popularity and the principles that shape how he views his work.

watch histories.

After the conversation with Ranney, Varshavski answered audience questions relating to artificial intelligence, content moderation online and the Trump administration.

Ranney said that the conversation provided valuable insight into questions administrators are grappling with at the School of Public Health.

“One of the big things that I think that we can and will lean into more based off of this conversation is thinking about how we train our students to be great online as well as offline communicators,” Ranney said.

Audience members said the discussion reshaped their perspectives on misinformation in healthcare.

Gabriel Hartman ’27, an economics and history major, said he was surprised by how closely Varshavski’s in-person demeanor mirrored his online persona and found the discussion of online moderation particularly compelling.

Ashyah Galbokke Hewage ’27, a neuroscience and history of sci-

ence, medicine and public health major, said he found Varshavski’s discussion of AI insightful.

“Something that stuck with me is his take on the fact that AI is not a good substitute for mental health care, and I think the fact that we do need to create boundaries with using AI as a form of mental health treatment,” Galbokke Hewage said.

Ranney added that preparing students for an evolving landscape is central to her work as dean.

“That’s something that I spend a ton of my time working on as a dean, is thinking about how I can set our school up to create a tomorrow that looks different from today, but also a tomorrow that looks different from yesterday or five years ago,” Ranney said. “The goal is not to recreate the past.”

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Yale still uses Roundup after years of gripes from locals

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sold under various brand names, including Rascal, Honcho, Expedite and Landmaster. Exposure has become so common that data from 2013-2014 found that 80 percent of Americans had traces of glyphosate in their urine.

In 2000, researchers published a paper in a toxicology journal in response to questions regarding the safety of glyphosate and Roundup. Based on animal trials, they asserted that “Roundup herbicide does not pose a health risk to humans.”

In the years following the study’s publication, evidence toward the contrary began to emerge.

A 2015 report from the International Agency for Research on Cancer classified glyphosate as “probably carcinogenic to humans.” Additional studies have shown that glyphosate exposure produces multiple forms of cancer in mice and rats, as rodents are often used as predictors of human disease.

“It is difficult to see how they could reach any conclusion other than glyphosate can cause cancers in experimental animals,” authors of the rat study wrote.

In 2017, litigation unearthed how the authors failed to disclose their affiliations and sources of funding. Monsanto, the producer of Roundup, had essentially “ghost-written” the safety paper. The details of the scandal were publicly released and dubbed the “Monsanto Papers.”

Roundup has changed its formula to decrease its glyphosate levels. In a 2021 call to investors, Bayer AG, which acquired Monsanto in 2018, said it would no longer sell glyphosate-based herbicides to consumers by 2023, though it would continue offering glyphosate to commercial entities. The company has already taken millions in losses and was involved with class action lawsuits.

In light of the controversy, the 2000 paper on glyphosate’s safety was officially retracted in December 2025.

“The potential financial compensation raises significant ethical concerns and calls into question the apparent academic objectivity of the authors in this publication,” Martin van den Berg, the editor-in-chief of “Regulatory Toxicology and Pharmacology,” wrote in the retraction statement.

As of 2026, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency still maintains that “there are no risks of concern to human health when glyphosate is used in accordance with its current label. EPA also found that glyphosate

is unlikely to be a human carcinogen.”

Sprayed in the city

In 2006, Laura Cahn smelled an odd, acrid stench coming from her backyard. Cahn lived on Cleveland Road, and her backyard was adjacent to Yale’s athletic fields. She knew that Yale sprayed chemical treatment — she had seen them do so, she said — to maintain the grass composition, but the generous application sounded an alarm in her.

Concerned, Cahn inquired with Yale, which told her the odor she had been smelling was Roundup, a commercially available herbicide, she said. Though Yale reassured her it was safe, Cahn said her mind immediately went to her young daughter and the potential health hazards of chemical exposure.

Cahn filed a complaint with Connecticut’s Department of Energy and Environmental Protection which sent an inspector to investigate the site 10 days later. The report came back negative, as Cahn had expected, she said. In the 10 days it took for the DEEP inspector to arrive, rain had washed away the remaining chemical residue from her backyard plants, Cahn recalled.

As Yale continued to use Roundup, Cahn said she remained wary of the chemicals around her.

Cahn and one neighbor, Jeanne Dubino, an English professor at Appalachian State University, in 2011 met with Ginger Chapman, the then director of the Office of Sustainability, and Phil Sissick, director of Landscaping and Maintenance Services, about getting advanced notice from Yale about any pesticides. According to Cahn, Chapman acknowledged their request and agreed to alert the neighborhood before spraying pesticides.

“They promised they would do it, and they did not notify us in advance of spraying pesticides,” Cahn said in a recent interview.

Sissick did not respond to the News’ request for comment.

Yale groundskeepers did, however, briefly stop using pesticides on the part of the field closest to Cahn’s yard for a couple of years, according to Cahn.

Dubino and Cahn spoke to local media about their complaints in 2013. Many of the pesticides used then were, and remain, EPA-approved. However, both women stressed that legality was besides the point.

“Guns are legal. Tobacco is legal. Cigarettes are legal. And it’s not OK,” Cahn told the New Haven Independent in 2013.

Steve Herzog, a Yale Golf Course

groundskeeper, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma in 1997. In a 2011 essay titled, “Poisoned Golf,” Herzog described himself as a “whistleblower.”

“This same occupational doctor concluded with a reasonable degree of medical certainty that I got my lymphoma from exposures to multiple pesticides at YGC, including through the well water exposure,” Herzog wrote in the essay, referring to the Yale Golf Course.

Herzog described suffering from weekslong nose bleeds and being offered no personal protective equipment while he did his work. In 2014, Herzog submitted a statement for Connecticut House Bill 5330, which proposed banning the application of pesticides on parks, playgrounds, athletic fields and municipal greens — areas where children are likely to frequent. The motion failed in March 2014.

“You may ask why I did not refuse to do it,” Herzog wrote. “In the back of my mind, I would say to myself, this is Yale University, one of the top universities in the world. It must be safe to apply it.”

Herzog passed away on Feb. 14, 2025, according to his brother, Don Herzog.

Years later, concerns over pesticide use persisted. Again, in 2021, Cahn saw a Yale groundskeeper spraying pesticides, and she filed a complaint with the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. According to Cahn, the report earned her a call from Yale’s Karen McIntosh, who told her that the substance was glufosinate ammonium, or “synthetic glyphosate.”

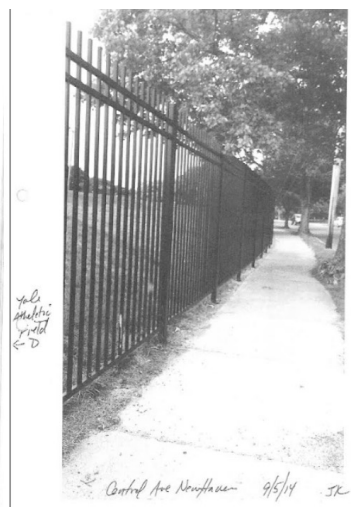
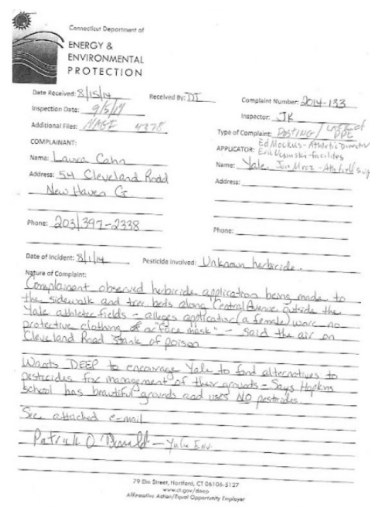
McIntosh did not respond to the News’ request for comment.

Though glufosinate is sometimes used as an alternative to glyphosate, excess exposure can cause pronounced neurologic symptoms, including dizziness, headaches and seizures, according to an article in the “Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine.”

Louise Washer, the president of the Norwalk River Watershed Association and on the board of Pollinator Pathway, said she has been deeply involved in the local fight against pesticides.

She helped organize the Connecticut Pesticide Reform, a coalition including the Connecticut Audubon, Save the Sound and other organizations that advocates for stricter pesticide policies.

“What I don’t understand is that we have this bizarre vision of a monoculture of just grass,” Washer



COURTESY OF LAURA CAHN

Left: A complaint to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection submitted by Cahn in 2014. Right: A photo of the alleged pesticide application site.

said. “I think that’s a lot of the use of glyphosate — to spot, kill, dandelions or little violets that grow in the grass that people want.”

In April 2022, Washer and Cahn went to the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection office in Hartford to sift through boxes of pesticide reports. They soon came across a setback: Nothing was organized, Cahn said. Physical records lacked dates, locations and amounts of pesticide used.

“We have a huge problem in Connecticut that we don’t have a way to know how much of a certain pesticide is being used, where it’s being used, or in what region,” Washer said in an interview. “So it makes it really difficult to pass good policy.”

The Environmental Protection Agency made a finalized stance on glyphosate in 2020. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection continues to classify glyphosate products registered with EPA as “general-use.”

“General-use pesticides can be sold to and used by anyone without any requirement for a person to have pesticide certification, maintain application records or submit reports of their use to DEEP,” William Flood, a spokesperson for Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, wrote in a statement to the News.

Karen Beaulieu, a representative of the U.S. Geological Survey, said that the agency does not have data on levels of glyphosate in the areas surrounding Yale. The U.S. Geological Survey monitors the water quality of waterways across the United States for chemicals and contaminants, including

glyphosate in some areas.

Washer and Cahn are hoping that the state will pass a bill called the “Pesticide Data Modernization Act,” which would require the state to create a searchable database of records.

“There just seems to be a disconnect between the science going on at the University and the decisions being made about land use that contribute to some of the pollution the scientists are testing,” Washer said. “I don’t get that, especially for the way for the state.”

Washer pointed to successful examples of research-based pesticide bans, including New York’s “Birds and Bees” Protection Act. Enacted in 2023, the act phases out the use of neonicotinoid insecticide sprays on seeds, which indirectly harm native insect populations.

The act was motivated in part by a 2017 Cornell study that investigated pesticide risks to essential pollinators like honeybees.

“The best alternative would of course be not having to use herbicides at all, e.g. with mechanical/benign methods of weed control,” Lars Ratjen, a researcher with Yale’s Center for Green Chemistry, wrote to the News.

Ratjen suggested using hot water works to kill weeds for certain applications — a method of using vinegar-based acids or even creating a “benign foam” with steam that is used by the Swiss National Railway in their track beds.

The Yale Golf Course is located at 200 Conrad Dr.

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