

“Truth, which is important to a scholar, has got to be concrete. And there is nothing more concrete than dealing with babies, burps and bottles, frogs and mud.”
JEANE KIRKPATRICK, FORMER U.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS

Tech startup scene on the rise at Yale, student founders say

BY ANYA GEIST
STAFF REPORTER

Across campus, students are noticing a growing entrepreneurial scene as more Yalies turn toward tech-driven innovation. Student organizations are expanding programming, creating networks with investors and arranging opportunities for founders. Over the last two weekends, students have organized events inviting investors and other student entrepreneurs to campus, and participants at those events pointed towards a proliferation of similar events at Yale.

“The Yale builder community has been growing a lot in recent years,” Filippo Fonseca ’28, a student who participated in at least one of the recent events, said.

At YPitch, an event run by Yale Undergraduate Capital Partners on Friday, undergraduates, graduate students and alumni representing 10 startups pitched their projects to an audience of peers and venture capitalists, most of whom were Yale alumni, according to Mae Chew ’27, a co-president of the group. YPitch was the “centerpiece” of a week of panels and events with founders and venture capitalists, Chew wrote to the News.

The weekend before, Major League Hacking, an organization that runs student hackathons worldwide, hosted YHack, a two-day hackathon that drew more than 600 students from around the world to build code and hardware and network with sponsors. Some Yale students said events like YHack increase Yale’s visibility in the startup world.

YHack and YPitch are only a few events in a series of efforts by various Yale clubs to promote student entrepreneurship. The

Yale Entrepreneurial Society will be hosting 12 student founders in its first student hacker house in San Francisco this summer. The Yale Computer Society hosted a hackathon centered on agentic AI last month and hopes to run further hackathons in the fall, its co-president, Ryan Fernandes ’28, told the News.

Startups “still need a lot of talent,” Steven Zhou ’27, the co-director of YHack, said. “These tech companies, and a lot of startups, have a lot of trouble finding them, so I thought it’s just like a perfect opportunity to reinvigorate a club,” he added, referring to YHack.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, YHack drew more than 1,400 hackers to Payne Whitney Gymnasium, according to a News article from 2015. In 2024, though, the event only drew around 250 participants, a 2024 News story reported.

This year, from the 600 participants, 244 projects were submitted, and around 40 winners were chosen from categories that included hardware, personal artificial intelligence agents and best solo hack. Though most students were undergraduates from the United States, some participants came from graduate programs or schools abroad. Prizes were worth upwards of \$1,000 for the winning teams.

At YHack, Fonseca and his co-founder Emir Ahmed ’28 created PosturePoke, a wearable posture-correcting device. For Fonseca, YHack was just one of an increasing number of startup events at Yale. He mentioned that more investors visit campus for events and that Y Combinator, a startup accelerator and venture capital firm, has visited campus twice within the last year to meet with students.

So, when he and Ahmed saw YHack announced on LinkedIn, they were excited to participate

in a meaningful building event on campus, Fonseca said.

At YHack, students also had the opportunity to meet representatives from some of YHack’s sponsors, learn more about their products and network with them.

Kyle McVeigh, a founding engineer at LavaAI, an AI-based marketing tool, said that his goal by attending YHack was to encourage students to use LavaAI and gather feedback from them.

“Being where the engineers are, being where the programmers are,” McVeigh said, “it’s exactly where we want to be.”

In addition to providing an interesting and meaningful experience to participants, Zhou and his co-directors, Michael Gao ’27 and Perryn Chang ’27, said they hope that Yale’s reputation in the startup world will improve due to events like the hackathon.

“You don’t think of us as a tech powerhouse,” Zhou said, referring to Yale.

Zoya Hussain ’29, who helped organize YHack, said she believes the event could expand in future years. This year, for example, the hackathon largely took place on select floors of Kline Tower, 17 Hillhouse, and in Davies Auditorium and O.C. Marsh Lecture Hall. Hussain noted that it would have been nice to have a larger space for participants, such as Payne Whitney Gymnasium, which YHack used in past years.

“I think it was just us having to redevelop our like ethos and like our reputation in the eyes of Yale so that hopefully in future years, we can provide a better space for our participants,” Hussain said.

Hussain, who is also a member of Yale Undergraduate Capital Partners, and was working at the welcome table for YPitch, emphasized the importance of



ANYA GEIST / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Student groups have been organizing a number of events focused on promoting students’ startups, as well as connecting them with professionals and potential investors.

events like YPitch, where many students had built projects over the course of months.

“I think it’s really important to be able to have a space where students have the opportunity and agency to explore their ideas for the first time, and people who are genuinely putting faith in that and willing to back and support those students,” Hussain said.

Though Hussain is only a first year, she has already noticed the energy around startups at Yale. She mentioned that at the beginning of the year, a presentation by the Yale Entrepreneurial Society said that more Yalies than ever are taking gap semesters to work on building projects.

“As a computer science major, every other conversation I’ve had is with students who are cultivating and fostering their ideas for the next big thing or some solution that they finally feel empowered to start pursuing because of the wealth of resources and support at Yale, which is really amazing to see,” Hussain said.

Chew emphasized that the goal of YPitch was to expose students to investors and support them as they seek to grow their projects, while also signaling to venture capitalists that “there is serious founder talent coming out of Yale.”

Chew attributed some of the growth of the Yale startup scene to the increasing accessibility of the tech world.

“The barrier to building has dropped dramatically: AI tools, no-code platforms, and cloud infrastructure mean you can prototype something meaningful as an undergrad,” Chew wrote. “Students are increasingly thinking of building as a viable and exciting path, not just something that happens after you’ve done two years in consulting or banking, and we want to help support it the best way possible.”

Many YHack participants worked on their projects in Steep Cafe.

Contact **ANYA GEIST** at anya.geist@yale.edu.

Writers discuss how AI is changing their work at Yale Review panel

BY MELISSA ADAMANTIDI
STAFF REPORTER

A group of writers convened on campus Wednesday to discuss artificial intelligence and its implications for writing, language and the humanities.

The event, which was called “AI and the Future of Humanities” and organized by The Yale Review, featured writers Ayad Akhtar, Daniel Kehlmann and Meghan O’Rourke ’97, the magazine’s executive editor. James Surowiecki GRD ’05, a col-

umnist for The Atlantic and a senior editor at The Yale Review, moderated the conversation about the ways AI has already altered the work being produced in their spheres.

Kehlmann, a German novelist whose work has been translated into 40 languages, said his relationship to AI is unresolved.

“It’s neurotic,” he said. “I have a very neurotic relationship to AI, and I think most of us do.”

Kehlmann said the source of his neurosis is a contradiction he cannot reconcile: The same technol-

ogy he finds “indispensable” may also destroy civilization. He said he regularly uses the large language model Claude for research, including to brief himself on geopolitical events. One time, he used AI to pull from Albanian-language news media before meetings with Albanian public figures, he said. He added that AI hallucinations have become a minimal concern, comparable to the error rate to that of a skilled human researcher.

Akhtar, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright whose Broadway play “McNeal” centered on AI and literary appropriation, said he had been sensing something algorithmically structured about cultural production since 2018, years before large language models were publicly accessible. He described a feeling that sentences, novels and television had taken on some predictability, a preexisting logic he could not yet name.

Akhtar said that using the technology has complicated his own relationship to writing, forcing him to double down on honing his craft even as he watches certain abilities erode.

“It has both sharpened and dulled my ability with language,” he said. “It is transforming my thought processes.”

Despite that tension, Akhtar argued that AI would ultimately clarify rather than erase what is distinctly human.

“AI is going to make ever more clear the distinction between the machine and what we are,” he said. “Conversations about the interior, and what we may or may not want to call the soul, are going to become more relevant.”

Kehlmann said he was not particularly concerned with the prospect of AI producing better novels than people.

“There’s something really not interesting about a novel not written by a human being to me,” he said.

O’Rourke predicted a growing divide between commercial production, which AI will increasingly shape, and noncommercial or avant-garde work.

O’Rourke, a poet, said the technology is disruptive, but she warned against reducing it to a binary of utopia versus catastrophe. She argued that what AI reproduces is not a text or an object but cognition itself.

“The thing that’s being reproduced now is not the thing we made,” she said. “It’s our own minds.”

O’Rourke added that many computer scientists have told her they do

not fully understand how the models they built are working, and that the models sometimes surface things they did not ask for.

Kehlmann said he believes the engineers behind AI are “not really philosophically equipped to deal with the size of their own achievement.”

Kehlmann said that if AI continues developing at its current rate, humanity may find itself inside a philosophical experiment. He said he holds out hope that sufficiently reasoning entities, artificial or otherwise, will arrive at the same moral conclusions any rational being would.

“I have moments when I think this is our only chance,” he said. “I hope Kant is right.”

Surowiecki said one of the most pressing challenges ahead is not mistaking a fake video for real, but rather the reverse, when people dismiss genuine footage as AI-generated. He said that skepticism, while appropriate, creates a problem with no easy solution.

The Yale Review, which was founded in 1819, is the oldest literary quarterly in the United States.

Contact **MELISSA ADAMANTIDI** at melissa.adamantidi@yale.edu.



MELISSA ADAMANTIDI / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The Yale Review hosted a panel of three writers to discuss how artificial intelligence currently plays a role in their fields, as well as how they anticipate it changing the humanities.

New Haven fire department stalwart becomes its new chief

BY NELLIE KENNEY AND BRETT PENK
STAFF REPORTER & CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The Board of Alders unanimously approved the mayor’s appointment of Daniel Coughlin as the chief of the New Haven Fire Department on Monday.

Mayor Justin Elicker nominated Coughlin in late January, alongside three other department heads. Former Chief John Alston Jr. retired at the end of the same month. Coughlin, who has worked for the New Haven Fire Department since 2002, has served as chief in an acting capacity since then. Previously, he was the assistant chief of operations. Coughlin will be sworn in as chief on Tuesday.

“Chief Alston promised to raise us a fire chief from within the New Haven ranks and he delivered,”

said Ward 24 Alder Evette Hamilton, who spoke on behalf of the Aldermanic Affairs Committee to encourage alders to approve Coughlin’s appointment.

Three other alders spoke in favor of Coughlin’s nomination before the vote.

“He is a New Haven kid from a firefighter family. He has risen through the ranks,” Ward 10 Alder Anna Festa said in an interview. “Shows we have growth within the fire department, and people within the ranks can move up.”

Coughlin was born in Fair Haven and has served as a firefighter, lieutenant, captain, battalion chief and assistant chief of operations during his 24-year tenure at the New Haven Fire Department, according to the press release announcing his nomination.

In an interview after the board approved his appointment, Coughlin said he is a fourth-generation firefighter.

“This is actually the first promotion that my father’s not alive to pin my badge on me, but I know he’s very proud of what’s going on,” Coughlin said, adding that he was “extremely honored” by the appointment.

Coughlin said he “didn’t wait for the confirmation during the acting time” but rather “hit the ground running.” His current priorities are firefighters’ mental health and recruiting from within New Haven, he said.

The department recently completed a peer support training, Coughlin said. Later this month, the department plans to swear in four clergy members

who will offer “spiritual guidance” to firefighters, he added.

“We are going to get out there in the community. We’re going to find new ways to reach New Haveners. I’m going to get into schools, I want to designate a point person to oversee recruitment and community outreach,” he said.

Ward 1 Alder Elias Theodore ’27 said he was looking forward to working with Coughlin.

“I am glad to see a person born and raised in the community in the role,” Theodore said.

The swearing-in ceremony took place at City Hall on Tuesday at 11 a.m.

Contact **NELLIE KENNEY** at nellie.kenney@yale.edu and **BRETT PENK** at brett.penk@yale.edu.



COURTESY OF LENNY SPEILLER

On Monday, the Board of Alders approved the appointment of Acting Chief Daniel Coughlin as chief of the New Haven Fire Department.