NEWS

"Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly."
CHUANG ZHU

Hacking helpfully, Yale senior co-founds a startup and wins rewards

BY MELISSA ADAMANTIDI
STAFF REPORTER

A Yale senior who earned 2 million United Airlines miles for identifying a significant vulnerability in the airline's computer systems has co-founded an artificial intelligence cybersecurity startup to help companies fix software weaknesses before they can be exploited.

The startup, Strix, founded by Alex Schapiro '26 and Ahmed Allam, develops automated tools that scan code and applications for security flaws — a practice known as ethical hacking. According to Allam, Strix is currently in the seed stage and working with enterprise clients as it expands its platform and product capabilities.

The idea for the company grew out of the founders' interest in identifying how systems break. Allam wrote to the News that his background in AI and early experience exploring software vulnerabilities led him to build tools that could scale that process.

"I was always curious about how systems worked, where they broke, and how they could be improved," he wrote.

Schapiro's path into cybersecurity followed a similar trajectory, beginning with hands-on experimentation while building applications in high school.

"In high school I would be building apps where I would need to scrape data from websites, and that data wasn't always easily accessible. So I would find ways around it to get the data I needed, and often when doing that I would find much more data was public than the website was expecting," Schapiro wrote to the News.

Over time, that curiosity developed into a sustained focus on identifying vulnerabilities and reporting them responsibly.

"My mom also is in the cybersecurity field so I have always been exposed to it," he wrote. "Beyond that, I love helping people out, so hacking a company and telling them how to fix it is a great way to protect the users because otherwise their user data could be exposed."

Earlier this year, Schapiro identified vulnerabilities in United Airlines' systems, earning a total of 2.6 million airline miles through the company's bug bounty program — including one reward of 2 million miles for a particularly major vulnerability — he told the News.

"This recent experience with United also was super memorable — my first ever official bug bounty was from United my freshman year of college, for 250k miles, but this time I was able to get the maximum reward possible," he wrote.

Schapiro wrote that he has seen a rise in vulnerabilities as artificial intelligence tools make it easier to build and deploy software quickly, often without strong security protections.

"Especially in the age of AI I have seen way more vulnerabilities than ever before, which is why I decided to co-found this company that can help companies who are building fast using AI to ensure the code they are pushing is secure," he wrote.

Strix aims to address that issue by automating the process of identifying vulnerabilities, allowing developers to continuously test their applications rather than relying on periodic audits.

"Normal penetration tests, what it is called when you pay someone to proactively hack your app, cost anywhere from $10-20,000, so this is a much more affordable way to make sure your app is secure, and it does it every day on every code change so you can be confident about the code you are pushing," Schapiro wrote.

For Schapiro, the distinction between ethical and unethical hacking is defined by how vulnerabilities are handled.

"It is not ethical to hack an app and exploit it, but it is ethical to hack an app without changing any information on it and just disclosing it right away to the company so they can fix it before a bad guy targets them," he wrote.

He added that companies' responses to vulnerability disclosures can vary. Some get angry or defensive, he wrote, but most react positively.

Beyond the company itself, ethical hacking raises broader legal questions about how cybersecurity is regulated. Yale Law School professor Scott Shapiro said in an interview with the News that while ethical hacking is intended to improve security, it exists within complex legal boundaries.

"Ethical hacking is understood to be a practice whereby a hacker tries to find and or exploit vulnerabilities for the purposes of making products safer," Shapiro said. "So it's ethical hacking because you're doing it because you're trying to harden the system."

However, he emphasized that intent alone does not determine legality.

Shapiro also questioned whether current legal frameworks adequately incentivize companies to prioritize security and warned that artificial intelligence may intensify existing vulnerabilities.

"So I think it's just like spewing bugs into cyberspace," he said.

Yale's Digital Ethics Center, founded in 2023, focuses on the ethical and societal implications of emerging technologies.

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KALINA SABALA MONTES / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
A practice called ethical hacking helps identify software vulnerabilities so they can be fixed. Alex Schapiro '26 has won over 2 million airline miles from United and co-founded a company using AI tools to pick out cybersecurity weaknesses.

In second lecture as Yale fellow, Brooks shares how not to be a 'jerk'

BY LEO NYBERG AND ARIA LYNN-SKOV
STAFF REPORTERS

David Brooks, the former New York Times columnist who was recently appointed as Yale's first presidential senior fellow, gave a lecture on Tuesday about a topic he felt was not important to discuss at Yale: "How to be Ambitious Without Being a Jerk."

"The students here don't need this topic. If you were a jerk, you'd all be at Harvard" Brooks said, drawing laughs from the audience in a nearly packed Henry R. Luce Hall.

In the lecture, Brooks detailed what he believes are the best ways to have successful academic and professional careers. He emphasized passion, curiosity and the "gleam" he sees in students', young children's and even adults' eyes when they speak about a topic that excites them.

Brooks is in the first semester of his five-year appointment as the inaugural presidential senior fellow. The fellowship program, which was established by University President Maurie McInnis to bolster intellectual diversity on campus, was announced in January. Brooks is currently the only fellow. Tuesday's lecture was his second of a four-part series this semester.

Brooks drew laughter from the audience on at least 26 occasions throughout his lecture, which included lines about God, sex and the New York Mets, his favorite baseball team.

Tuesday's lecture, like his first talk on why he still considers himself a conservative, drew a large crowd — largely made up of people around Brooks' age. Throughout the talk, Brooks did not pitch specific career paths but instead encouraged students to find "a certain lane" and follow their passions.

"I think what stood out to me most was that there was such a beautiful wealth of examples," Krish Ramkumar '28 said about Brooks' lecture. "There's one way of going about a talk like this where you just say moral principles, one after the other, and then you hope one of those sticks. Or you can just give so many real world, lived examples of ambition, and the different ways that it manifests, and then you can construct your own picture from that."

During the question-and-answer session, Ramkumar asked Brooks to expand on the "how not to be a jerk" part of his lecture.

Brooks answered that focusing on individual goals, like belonging, instead of worshipping concepts like money or power lead to ambition that is also kind.

"I think his response is very useful about aligning your desires," Ramkumar said, adding that Brooks' answer did not preclude any fields like business or finance but instead encouraged students to keep "people first" while pursuing their ambitions.

In his lecture, Brooks also said that "technological sloth," which he called the ability to farm out intellectual work to artificial intelligence, is a "spiritual poison" for society.

"My fear for AI — and nobody knows anything about AI, and I don't know any, claim to know more than anybody else," Brooks said, "is that the 10 or 20 percent of humanity that likes to think will use AI to power their thinking, and they'll be really impressive. But the 80 percent of humanity that doesn't like to think will use it as a substitute for thinking."

Like the last lecture, Brooks' talk was followed by a seminar-style discussion open to interested students.

Earlier in the day, Brooks spoke at a Yale Law School event with Emily Bazelon '93 LAW '00, a writer for The New York Times Magazine and a research scholar at Yale.

Brooks' next lecture, which is titled "How America Recovers from All This: A Hopeful Vision for our Common Future," is set for April 7 and will be held in Sheffield-Sterling-Strathcona Hall.

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ARIA LYNN-SKOV / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
David Brooks, Yale's inaugural presidential senior fellow and a former New York Times columnist, gave a lecture on Tuesday that focused on the value of students having passion and curiosity.