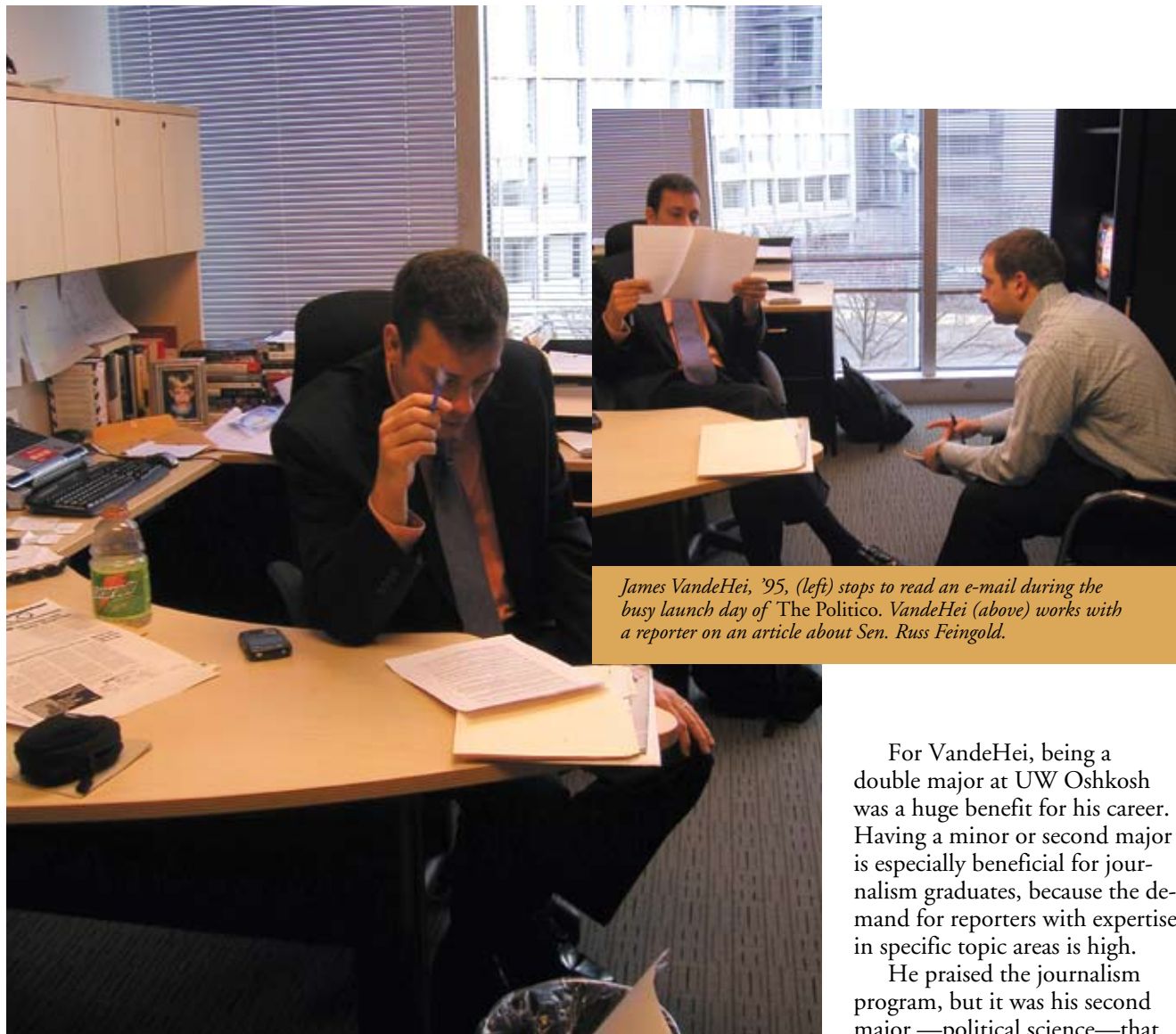


Alumni at Work

Politics—but not journalism—is business as usual for alum covering Capitol Hill



James VandeHei, '95, (left) stops to read an e-mail during the busy launch day of *The Politico*. VandeHei (above) works with a reporter on an article about Sen. Russ Feingold.

For VandeHei, being a double major at UW Oshkosh was a huge benefit for his career. Having a minor or second major is especially beneficial for journalism graduates, because the demand for reporters with expertise in specific topic areas is high.

He praised the journalism program, but it was his second major —political science—that

really gave him an edge. “I never would have come (to Washington) if it hadn’t been for the political science department,” he said.

During his time at UW Oshkosh, he applied for an internship with **Sen. Herb Kohl**. The other applicants were looking to get into politics themselves, but VandeHei’s goal was different—he wanted to write about politics. “I wanted to see it from the inside out,” he said.

And he knew he was on the right track after working for Kohl: “I decided this was what I wanted to do,” he said.

He’s covered the 2004 presidential campaign and the scandal surrounding the leaked identity of CIA agent Valerie Plame. **Jim VandeHei**, an Oshkosh native who graduated from UW Oshkosh in 1995, is at the top of the political heap in Washington, D.C.

After six years as a national political reporter for the *Washington Post*, VandeHei is at the helm of a new media venture that aims to have the best coverage of national politics in town.



VandeHei, '95, prepares for a TV interview.

After graduating, he moved to the nation’s capital, where he worked his way up the political journalism ladder. A job at a small publication called *New Fuels Report* led to writing for one called *Inside the New Congress*. The rest is history: VandeHei earned his reputation at the political newspaper *Roll Call*, the *Wall Street Journal* and finally the *Washington Post*.

After six years at the *Post*, VandeHei and his colleague Mark Harris began tossing around the idea of starting their own media venture. The concept: high-quality political reporting, with a conversational tone that made it interesting for readers.

“We started asking around, seeing if anyone might want to invest in this,” VandeHei said. As it turned out, the stars were aligned in their favor—Allbritton Communications was interested, and the deal was sealed “in about a day,” he said.

Virtually overnight, VandeHei went straight from reporter to executive editor. Now, instead of spending all day on the phone with Capitol Hill sources, he’s running his own media organization.

However, he likes being in charge; the best part is “hiring people I’ve always admired,” he said.

Although media startups can be risky business, VandeHei thinks he made the right decision.

“It’s such a great opportunity,” he said. “Life doesn’t give you many opportunities like that, and you have to take them as they come.”

On its first day of publication, Jan. 23, *The Politico* was going strong. **Michael Bloomberg**, the mayor of New York City, was spotted carrying a copy, as was

Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois. The publication itself got its own kind of media attention, as prominent bloggers and media critics weighed in online.

VandeHei and his media director, Kim Kingsley, spent much of that first day loading and reloading *drudgereport.com* to see if any of their Web stories were linked. The *Drudge Report* is one of the most popular “news roundup” sites on the Web, and a link on its front page means a lot of extra hits on your own site.

As it turned out, *Drudge* linked to not one, but two *Politico* articles, helping send an impressive 800,000 visitors to *politico.com* on that first day alone.

The newspaper will publish three times a week when Congress is in session, but the main

focus is on the Web, where reporters keep blogs, and a running list of “Politicos on Air” is constantly updated.

VandeHei, Harris and other *Politico* reporters frequently appear on major news networks to weigh in on the day’s top Capitol Hill stories. On Jan. 23, they logged at least 15 television spots, including an appearance by VandeHei on CBS after **President George Bush’s** State of the Union address.

Yet despite all the media attention and a near-celebrity status among D.C. journalists, VandeHei appears to remain grounded. His office desk, while cluttered with piles of books written by politicians, also features several photos of his wife and two children—plus some **Green Bay Packers** memorabilia. And he was concerned about how this article would read.

“My parents are going to read it and think I do nothing but work,” he laughed.

—Stephanie Barnard

Editor’s Note

Stephanie Barnard, a UW Oshkosh senior majoring in journalism, is the managing editor of the student-run *Advance Titan*. She was chosen by the journalism department to go on assignment and job shadow Jim VandeHei, during January’s interim session.



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