

MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

[Home](#) » [Summer 2011](#) » [Features](#) » [The Times techie](#)



The Times techie

Brian Hamman helps advance the newspaper's online presence

Story by Stephanie Detillier | Photo by Simon Biswas

On the morning after each year's Academy Awards, *The New York Times* print edition delivers what its subscribers have come to expect: comprehensive coverage of the evening's big winners, emotional speeches, odd moments, stunning wardrobes and stale jokes. It's "All the news that's fit to print."

Only that's not enough anymore. With the explosion of social media, live video feeds and up-to-the-minute blogging, news consumers have been demanding more: More than day-after stories. More than perfunctory Web updates. More than what *The New York Times* and other newspapers were known for offering.

So in 2007, with hopes of gaining its footing in the digital world, the *Times* assembled an interactive news technology division, a group of journalist-programmers that experiments with Web storytelling. As its deputy editor, Brian Hamman, MA '06, now leads the development of impressive online news applications and social media strategies. His task, ultimately, is to help carry the venerable *Times* brand into the ever-changing media landscape.

Take, for example, the online coverage of the [2011 Oscars](#). Before the ceremony, [nytimes.com](#) users could fill out Oscar ballots, see celebrity ballot picks, and view their Facebook friends' Oscar predictions on nytimes.com by synching their accounts. Catering to consumers who surf the Web while watching the televised broadcast, nytimes.com also offered a "second-screen experience" beginning at 4 p.m. Using a computer, mobile phone or iPad, people could view red carpet photos before they aired on TV, follow Oscar-related Twitter and Facebook updates, and watch video analysis during commercial breaks.

"This year we wanted to make our Oscar ballot more social by tying it to Facebook," Hamman

says. “We’re trying to figure out how to more organically let people share news and discuss news.”

Since its inception, Hamman’s team has built splashy interactive election guides, organized a user-friendly cache of [WikiLeaks documents](#) and collaborated with investigative reporters on a [multimedia package](#) about water pollution. By combining technical programming with data-driven storytelling, Hamman and his colleagues are creating collaborative forms of journalism that are more extensive and social than what the print “paper of record” can offer readers.

Data driven

Few journalists land a full-time job at *The New York Times*, but then again, few professionals have both programming expertise and journalism education. As an undergraduate at Washington University in St. Louis, Hamman minored in computer science and majored in American cultural studies. Both fields exposed him to database research and multimedia development.

“I did a lot of digital archive work and interactive storytelling, but my subjects just happened to be dead or very old,” he says. “My progression from that to Missouri to here at the *Times* was natural.”

In the journalism graduate program at Mizzou, Hamman worked as a graduate assistant for the [National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting](#). Through NICAR, which trains investigative journalists to analyze large data sets such as public records, he met Aron Pilhofer, a member of the *Times*’ newly expanded computer-assisted reporting team.

‘We’re trying to figure out how to more organically let people share news and discuss news.’ — *Brian Hamman*

When Pilhofer later contacted him about a *Times* job opening, however, Hamman wasn’t sure he wanted to live in New York City. A Southern California native, he had planned to move to a medium-sized city after completing his thesis and was looking into doctoral programs. But who turns down an opportunity to work at the *Times*?

Initially, Hamman’s job was mostly administrative. He had been hired to create internal applications to help the organization track laptops and monitor the completion of employee evaluations. Some *Times* editors didn’t fully understand the potential of computer-assisted

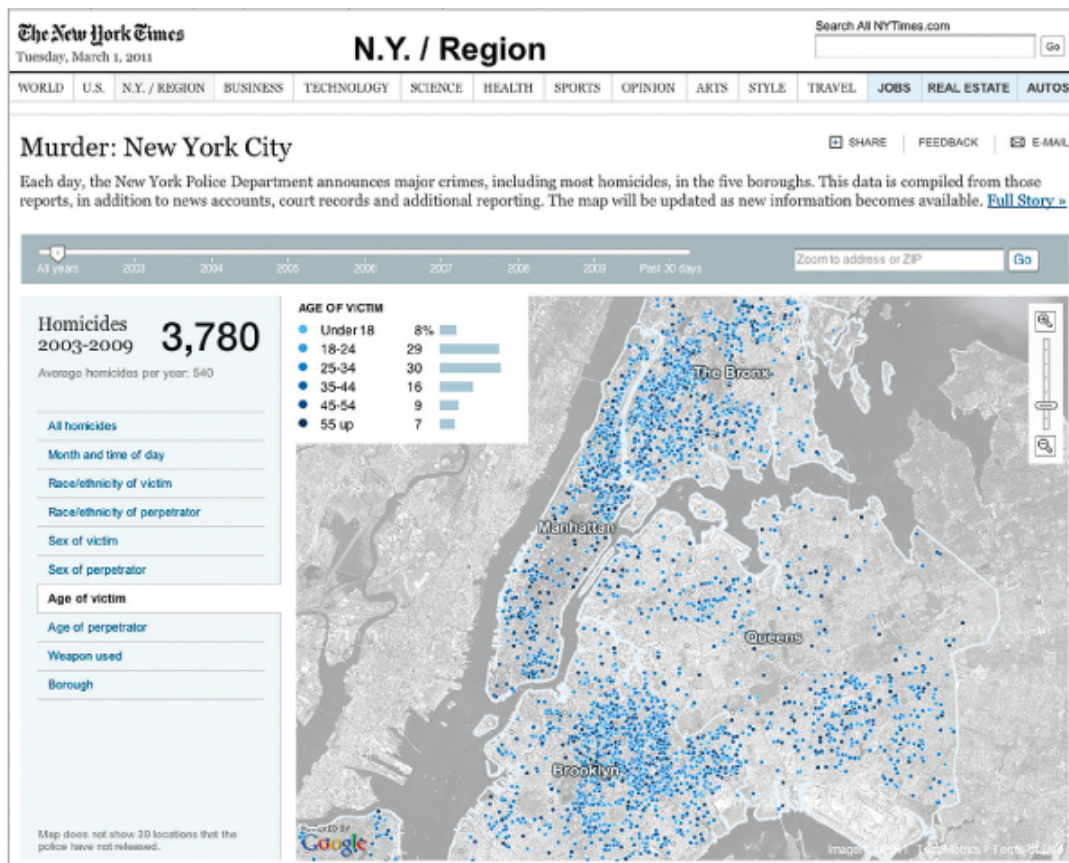


As deputy editor of the *Times*’ interactive news technology division, Brian Hamman leads a team that develops news applications and social media strategies.

reporting, widely known as CAR. Hamman recalls the confusion after he introduced himself during orientation as a new member of the CAR team.

“I then had one journalist reintroduce me to other staffers as the new auto reporter,” says Hamman, incredulously.

However, he soon began working on a Web project that tracked New York City homicides. Using New York Police Department data, the application mapped murders in the city’s five boroughs. Users could zoom in on neighborhoods and sort the information based on years, months, weapons used, and the victim’s or perpetrator’s demographics. Through this visualization, people could spot crime trends in their neighborhoods. The application was one of the newspaper’s early steps toward giving readers news that was interactive and customizable.



Early in his career at the *Times*, Hamman helped track New York City homicides on this interactive map, which allows users to sort data based on factors including geography, type of weapon and perpetrator’s age. Courtesy of *The New York Times*

Keeping up with the *Times*

When Hamman joined the *Times*, print and Web staffers were not well integrated in the newsroom. The Web team was housed in a building several blocks away from the main *Times* facility, fostering a disconnect between the reporters and the team packaging the stories for the Web. Many critics were also beginning to wonder how the *Times* would adjust to the seismic shifts in the journalism industry as advertising revenues declined and corporate debt increased. How would the *Times* maintain its reputation as a highly respected, authoritative

news source while devoting resources to Web-only storytelling and social media?

In August 2007, Pilhofer met with *The New York Times* editors and pitched the idea of forming a newsroom of programmers who had journalism experience and journalists who dabbled in programming. The goal was to create a more dynamic Web experience by collaborating with the graphics, multimedia and news desks. Hamman began working with the *Times*' newest venture immediately and officially joined the division a year later.

Although Hamman and his colleagues occasionally contribute to breaking news coverage, most of their work involves long-term investigative reporting and major news events. They build tools that track Olympic medal counts and congressional votes. They update the searchable database on the 779 Guantanamo Bay detainees and make applications such as interactive March Madness brackets. They also develop interfaces for large collections of documents, such as the selection of WikiLeaks cables the *Times* republished.

“Everybody has a journalistic background, so we discuss what should and shouldn't be on the page and what's the news value,” Hamman says.

For the 2008 presidential race, the group developed an online election guide, which included a results map that was updated every two minutes on election night. Users could zoom in to see the race results in all 3,141 U.S. counties. Like many of the group's projects, their election packages reflect a new reality: People are no longer satisfied with passively consuming media; they want to interact with, share and add to the news.

‘The new features tugged the reader closer through comments and interactivity, rendering the relationship between reporter and audience more intimate, immediate, exposed.’ — New York *magazine*

Social strategy

Now as deputy editor, Hamman does less programming and more strategic project management. His latest challenge has been figuring out what type of social media presence the *Times* should have.

“In our older ad campaigns, the slogan has been ‘*The New York Times*: The conversation starts here,’ ” Hamman says. “Well, then immediately it's happening on Facebook and Twitter. Our job is to dig in and find out what we can learn from that. How can we capture that conversation and reflect it back on our site? How can we be aware of it? Is it our role to facilitate it? Can the *Times* add something to Facebook and Twitter conversations?”

Staffers are building tools to help the newsroom monitor social media for newsgathering purposes and solicit user-generated material. One of their programs helps moderate the thousands of submissions the *Times* receives when it asks readers to share their travel, snow or New York Fashion Week photos.




With the increasingly social nature of news sharing and desire for interactivity, Hamman and his co-workers have not only added a dimension to the *Times* but also helped modernize the newspaper's identity.

New York magazine has gone as far as lauding some of the newspaper's innovative Web projects as "a radical reinvention of the *Times* voice ... the new features tugged the reader closer through comments and interactivity, rendering the relationship between reporter and audience more intimate, immediate, exposed."

The vast possibilities of the Web might have initially threatened "The Gray Lady." If it's up to Hamman, that will also be what makes her stronger.

Share your comments with Mizzou magazine at Mizzou@missouri.edu.

Note: If published, feedback may be edited for length, style and clarity.

 [Follow us on Twitter](#)  [Join us on Facebook](#)  [Subscribe to our feed](#)

Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-882-5916
| E-mail: Mizzou@missouri.edu

Opinions expressed in this site do not necessarily reflect the official position of MU or the Mizzou Alumni Association.

Copyright © 2021 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and other [copyright information](#).

An [equal opportunity/affirmative action](#) institution.

Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013