COMM 1500 Media and Society emphasizes critical consumption of media messages and the implications of producing such messages. Students engage with technological, business, historical, legal, and ethical foundations of media communication to become more informed and better able to articulate their responsibilities in the mediated world.

To do that, this course has three parts. The first is about information. Students consider questions such as: What is “news”? Where do we get it? What are the values of journalism? There are broader questions, too: What’s true? What’s not? How do we know what we think we know? The second part addresses misinformation. Students learn ways to distinguish between messages that are inaccurate or incomplete vs. messages that are deceptive or deliberately misleading. The third part is action. Students learn how previous activists have used media as different as books and radio, and they gain insights into the ways activism works today.

In this course, students connect the present with the past, guided by the idea that “the only thing that’s new is the history you don’t know.” They learn that media have been used for information, misinformation, and activism for literally hundreds of years. For example, the 1938 “War of the Worlds” broadcast affected listeners, in part, because it mimicked real news reports. That was a radio drama, but a few decades later a Washington Post story caused an uproar because “Jimmy’s World” featured a composite character, not an actual person. That was a journalistic sin, but what about deepfakes, such as in the documentary Roadrunner? Students reflect on these examples to determine when, if ever, it’s OK to use deception in the media.

This course engages with the community for two reasons. First, our lives are mediated. Even in the pre-pandemic world, interpersonal communication was increasingly digital and less face to face. Second, recent years have seen the rise of fundamental disagreements about facts, from climate change to vaccines. Social media are implicated in the spread of dangerous misinformation, but such controversies are not new. “Deplatforming” is just the latest phrase for the struggle over freedom of expression in the media, and students learn that “the marketplace of ideas” has a long history.

Media and Society pushes students to understand that while we are all media consumers, most of us are also media producers. This gives us power, and power comes with responsibility. As a capstone project, students articulate their ethical values and apply them to a problem they see in the media today.