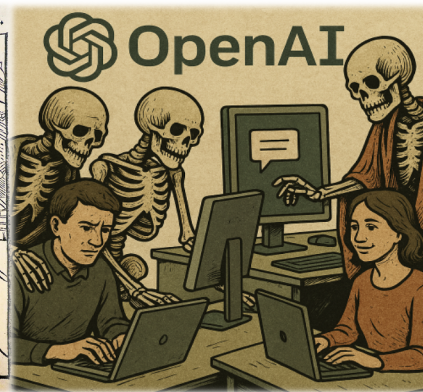# COMS 1001
Foundations: Media History

Fall 2025 // Fridays at 08:35-11:25 // RB 2200
Course Instructor: [Dr. Liam Cole Young](#)

*Depiction of a print shop as a "dance of death"
published by Matthias Huss, Lyon, France, 1499*

*Depiction of an OpenAI office as a "dance of death"
generated by ChatGPT, 2025*

COURSE OVERVIEW

"Our writing machines are working on our thoughts," wrote philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche upon using one of the world's first typewriters in 1882. Nietzsche's perceptive remark reminds us that people have, for a long time, been interested and sometimes disturbed by ways that media devices shape how we think, write, talk, see, hear, act, and otherwise engage with each other and the world.

Usually, we think about media history in terms of great inventions like the radio or television, or by focusing on brilliant inventors like Thomas Edison or Steve Jobs. This course takes a different approach. We are interested in discoveries that changed the world, but our focus is less on inventors or inventions than on the discovery of new media *functions*. "Function" is a fancy word to describe what a media device or system actually does, how it works, what it allows people to do, and how it interacts with the world. For example, the moment humans figured out they could *externalize* their thoughts and spoken language into written scripts and graphical symbols was perhaps the most consequential discovery in the history of the world. Similarly, once people found ways to *reproduce* images and sounds from the world in photographs and sound recordings, nothing would ever be the same. Do you see what I mean? The media objects and practices (writing, sound recording, photography) are important, but looking at their *functions* (i.e. externalization and reproduction) helps us gather a wider array of histories and stories. At least, that is the argument I will make to you each week as we explore the discovery of a new media function.

THEMES (TENTATIVE)

Discovery	Topics
DREAMS	Course introduction
	Dreams of transcendence
EXTERNALIZATION	Gesture and speech
	Writing
	Numeracy
	Non-written memory supports
COPYING	Manuscripts
	The printing press
	Literacy
	Protestant reformation
COORDINATION	Time measurement
	Postal systems
	Record keeping
	The state
COMPRESSION	Rail
	Telegraphy
	Telephony
REPRODUCIBILITY	Camera
	Gramophone
	Typewriter
SYNCHRONIZATION	Electrification
	Radio
	Television
COMPUTATION	Boolean logic
	Analytical engine
	Information
	Cybernetics
NETWORKING	Packet switching
	ARPANET
	Telidon
	Personal Computer
SEARCHING	Web 1.0 and 2.0
	Machine Learning
	Artificial Intelligence
	What will become of us?