

A person with long hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, is focused on working on a piece of equipment. A bright, glowing light source is visible, casting a warm, orange-red glow on the person's face and the equipment. The equipment has a small digital display showing the number '1.00'. The background is dark and out of focus.

VilasVoice

FALL 2025

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION ARTS | UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - MADISON

Spotlighting a New Era

An equipment overhaul 50 years in the making.

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LINDSEY CARDELL

Unstoppable and Uncontainable

FROM THE CHAIR

While every academic year brings new challenges, it also brings new proof of our department's unrelenting momentum. Through the talent of our students, the commitment of our faculty and staff, and the support of our alumni, Communication Arts is making an impact more widely and across more boundaries than ever before.

In course meetings and career events like Comm Arts at Work, our students doggedly pursue their dreams and find opportunities to apply their communication skills to many different needs. Our undergraduates become media professionals, corporate executives, community activists, and more. PhD students bring their cutting-edge perspectives to other campuses throughout the world. Our students are everywhere—adaptive, dynamic, and refusing to be boxed in.

Communication Arts faculty and staff find their own ways to push limits, challenge divides, and make impacts well beyond the department. We serve in leadership roles across campus and drive shared discoveries. From Professor Allison Prash's campus-wide efforts to strengthen democracy through better communication to Professor Jeremy Morris' advancement

of AI research across the humanities, we push the UW research mission. As that mission expands, we welcome new faculty this year who study topics from Latinidad media to digital conspiracy theories.

None of this would be possible without our alumni, who commit time and resources out of a love for their Communication Arts experiences and a belief that the future can be even brighter. Among the recent initiatives owing to this support are new scholarships that expand access to our program and an off-campus experience launching next summer to help students explore creative careers. Our alumni sustain our momentum while challenging us to reinvent the standards for departmental excellence.

These combined efforts across the Communication Arts community make us unstoppable, uncontainable, and undoubtedly well positioned for continued success. Thank you for being a part of that exciting future.

Sincerely,

Derek Johnson
Department Chair
Communication Arts Partners Professor

VilasVoice

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Online Giving

commarts.wisc.edu/giving

Your gift will make a difference in new departmental initiatives: technological improvements, speakers, scholarships and awards, special events, and career mentoring. Thank you for your support of the Communication Arts department.

The University of Wisconsin is an equal-opportunity and affirmative-action educator and employer. We promote inclusive excellence in all programs.

Front page: Shannon Finn adjusting a light during a filming session for "CA467 Cinematography and Soundrecording." Photo by Lindsey Cardell.



Students in "Music Video from MTV to TikTok" participating in a music fair use debate.

Behind the Beat

UNDERSTANDING THE TECHNOLOGY OF SOUND AND THE MUSIC INDUSTRY

As you inch closer to the classroom door, you can hear the distinct "bum bum be-dum, bum bum be-dum bum" from Rihanna's "Disturbia" echoing through the hall. You round the corner to see the music video projected at the front of the room and students quietly bopping their heads along with the beat. Class is now in session for the new special topics course, "Music Video from MTV to TikTok."

Led by Paxton Haven, our 2025–26 Visiting Assistant Professor in Communication Arts, students in this course dive into history to discover how technological shifts influence the media form of music video. This exploration of audio-visual media begins with "soundies" in the early 1940s and progresses to MTV and the rise of music videos as a means of song promotion, to the digital distribution revolution ushered in by YouTube, and finally to the current popular music branding era characterized by TikTok. Within each era, Professor Haven has students watch and analyze numerous music videos.

"We start by looking at what literally happened on the screen in the music video, then I build out context for what was happening in terms of the industry and technology at that moment in time," Haven said. "Those two things allow us to make broader arguments about how cultural shifts are reflected in music videos throughout history."

Many Communication Arts courses share this mission of revealing how technology affects different aspects of sound and music. Professor Jeremy Morris runs two such courses: "Sound Cultures—

Podcasting and Music" as well as "Music Industries and Popular Culture." Both include a final project that asks students to produce a podcast.

"Whether I'm talking about music or podcasting, I'm almost always coming from an angle that is technology-based," Morris said. In his "Music Industries" course, Morris helps students realize how songs are markers of moments in time.

New sound technologies, like Auto-Tune, have always created anxiety within the industry. When Auto-Tune made pitch correction

possible in the late 1990s, many criticized the technology, claiming it devalued real musical talent. However, artists have embraced the technology, and the sounds have grown familiar in popular music from artists as varied as Charli XCX, Post Malone, The Weeknd, Billie Eilish, Bon Iver, Radiohead, Frank Ocean, and many others.

Similar anxiety is seen today with the use of AI in sound production. These historical precedents help Professor Haven and Professor Morris get students thinking critically about the role of technology within sound industries like music, podcasting, and music video.

"If we're teaching students about media industries and how media works, it feels incomplete to try and do that without recognizing the importance of sound and sonic media."

JEREMY MORRIS

Sound technology also plays a major role in Communication Arts film courses, as students analyze various aspects of mise-en-scène within cinema. Film Professor Jeff Smith asks students to analyze a scene from Spike Lee's *25th Hour*, in which DJ scratching sounds bounce from speaker to speaker in the back of the theater. Utilizing the rear sound stage of a theater is one technique filmmakers use to build the story world as soundscapes become more technologically complex.

Professor Morris reflected that "if we're teaching students about media industries and how media works, it feels incomplete to try and do that without recognizing the importance of sound and sonic media." As sound technologies continue to evolve, Communication Arts will keep listening.

Spotlighting a New Era

AN EQUIPMENT OVERHAUL 50 YEARS IN THE MAKING

The dull buzz of the same lighting equipment has permeated our second-floor studios for over 50 years. For the first time this fall, that buzz will fade as these old lights are phased out and students begin using brand-new LED lighting kits in their productions.

These lights could have one of the most visible impacts on student production the department has ever seen. Gone are the days of blown fuses, tedious electrical patching, and flimsy color gels. Thanks to LED technology, students can now change the light colors with the touch of a button, adjust the brightness without altering the color temperature, and plug in numerous fixtures without overtaxing electrical systems.

Ensuring students learn with technology currently used in the industry is essential, but finding the right time to upgrade is difficult. "There's always a challenge when you're in an educational institution about when to upgrade because the opportunities for upgrading are limited," said Erik Gunneson, who teaches many advanced production courses in Communication Arts. "We always have to find a sweet spot where the technology offers a lot at a good price, while serving us well for a long time."

To supplement funding for projects like these, Communication Arts relies on Instructional Modernization Grants from the College of Letters and Science. These grants support department initiatives that enhance learning spaces and often enable the

"Anytime we make advancements that give students more room for creativity, it's always fun to see what they produce."

PETER SENGSTOCK



Students in "CA467 Cinematography and Soundrecording" experimenting with the new lighting equipment in class.

LINDSEY CARDELL

department to leverage support from donors to secure additional funds, effectively doubling the impact of each dollar.

Students will benefit from these updates immediately. The lights weigh much less and are packaged more concisely than the old ones, making them easier to transport between filming locations. They also use less energy and are significantly cooler, making them much safer for students to handle.

When selecting these new lights, Gunneson met with Communication Arts alumni like Noah Frassetto, Nina Ham, Paul Marschall, Corey Millikin, and Eric J. Nelson to see which lighting tools are currently being used in the industry. Gunneson then tagged Peter Sengstock, the Director of Media Services in Communication Arts, to join him for a visit to Red Star Rentals in Madison. Here, they enlisted the help of Tyler DeRaedt and Michael Hillson, two more Communication Arts alumni, to test out equipment and select fixtures to purchase.

"I'm excited to see what the students make," Sengstock said when asked about what this update will mean for students. "Anytime we make advancements that give students more room for creativity, it's always fun to see what they produce."

The first student films utilizing this new equipment will premiere at the Communication Arts Showcase, hosted at the Marquee Theater in Union South on December 13, 2025, at 7pm. The event is free and open to the public, and we hope you can join us to see this bright new era of student films.

Tool or Teammate?

DISCOVERING THE OPTIMAL WAY TO USE AI IN THE BRAINSTORMING PROCESS

LINDSEY CARROLL



Graduate student Ika Dai conducting a session of research for her brainstorming study.

Imagine it was your job to plan an event to let students get their first taste of UW–Madison. You might propose a cheese carving contest. Or maybe they get to make homemade ice cream and have their first scoop looking out at Lake Mendota. The process by which you might generate

these ideas is the focus of a new Communication Arts research project. By isolating different conditions, this study is discovering the optimal way to use artificial intelligence (AI) during the brainstorming process.

Ika Dai, a Communication Arts graduate student, described the study as a two-stage process exploring human-AI collaboration. "First, individuals generate creative ideas on their own or with the assistance of AI. Then, they work in pairs to continue generating and refining ideas." Some of these pairs consist of two human participants, while other pairs consist of one person and an AI teammate.

Isolating specific conditions helps Dai understand whether receiving help from AI at the initial stage of individual brainstorming enhances creativity compared to when people generate ideas by themselves. After the initial idea generation, students engage with either a human partner or an AI teammate to build on and improve their ideas.

After each study session, the brainstormed ideas are graded based on the total number of generated ideas and their quality. "High-quality" ideas are those that score well for both originality (i.e., how innovative or novel the idea is) and feasibility (i.e., how practical it is to implement the idea.) Throughout the process, the research team can track when and how each idea emerged, whether it originated from the human participant or AI, and understand whether AI can function as an effective teammate, comparable to a human partner, by enhancing the overall quantity and quality of ideas.

After all the ideas are evaluated, the researchers can see which isolated condition produced the most high-quality ideas, and therefore, when it is most beneficial to use AI when brainstorming. So far, the research team has observed that people often generate more ideas initially without using AI assistance. This is consistent with other examples of "hybrid brainstorming," according to Professor Lyn van Swol.

"If people brainstorm individually before getting into a group, they want to impress people, and this tends to motivate them to come up with better ideas to bring to the table," van Swol said.

Dai added, "On the other hand, when participants expect help from AI or know they'll be working with an AI partner, they tend to put in less effort themselves and rely more on what the AI produces."

Data is still being collected, so while the team cannot make concrete conclusions yet, they do note that the data shows humans tend to generate more ideas during the initial idea generation phases compared to those receiving AI support. However, AI overall appears to enhance the quality of the brainstorm by expanding on ideas, adding more specific details, determining logistics, or branching off to create even stronger ideas. Future results from this study are likely to have broad societal relevance as AI technologies continue to reshape everyday life.

Recap with Recent Grads

Online portfolios have become vital tools for recent graduates as they launch their careers. With the help of the Digital Studies Certificate Advisor, Amy Schultz, students earning the certificate get to build a digital portfolio in a final capstone course. These websites display the materials they created throughout their coursework and give them the tool they need to kick start their careers. We reached out to four recent Communication Arts graduates to hear how this asset has been valuable to them and to see what they've been up to since graduating.

Read more here: go.wisc.edu/commarts-recap



Top Left to Right: Olivia Cozzini, Samantha Hawes
Bottom Left to Right: Anna Krawczyk, Stella Serafico



Social Media as Literature

TO MEME OR NOT TO MEME, THAT IS THE QUESTION

For a long time, people assumed that reading great literature, like the works of Shakespeare, made people better, strengthened their character, and gave them culture. These days, however, few people find themselves engrossed in the monologues of *Hamlet* and are instead entrenched in a sub-thread on Reddit or the comments section of a viral TikTok video. Can social media make us better people in the same way it was once thought that reading Shakespeare could? Students in a new Communication Arts and Digital Studies course are working to find out.

The new course, "Social Media as Literature," has students apply theories from literature, folklore, rhetoric, and cultural studies to social media. Rob Howard, Professor in Communication Arts and the director and founder of the Digital Studies Certificate, created the course to allow students to develop more nuanced understandings of how everyday media impact their lives.

"I believe social media makes us think just like great film does, just like great literature does," Howard said. "The goal of the course is to get students to think about how we can make sure we're getting the most out of the artistic media that we're consuming every day."



Meme by Communication Arts student, anonymous.



Meme by Communication Arts student, anonymous.

Students began the semester by logging what they saw on social platforms like Reddit, Instagram, or X. Then, they generated memes and videos to build a deeper understanding of the posts they were seeing. Finally, they categorized different types of posts within specific genres.

Professor Howard knew the concept of social media as literature would spark some skepticism. He argues, though, that while literary form may be shifting, the principles remain.

"Reading a Shakespeare play requires an understanding of form, genre, and language to comprehend the story's message," he said. "Learning these principles is not fundamentally different than learning the principles of a 'get ready with me' video on TikTok."

As students finish out the first run of this course this December, Professor Howard hopes they leave with new ideas about reading literature. "If we develop our observation skills and apply those to social media, maybe we will reveal things we didn't see before," he said. "When we see new possibilities, we have more options, and we can make choices that help us live our lives in the ways we want to. By seeing social media as 'literature,' maybe we will be able to choose to live better."



Meme by Communication Arts student, Samantha Felner.

Strengthening Our Alumni Relations



With over 14,000 living alumni who earned degrees in Communication Arts since our program was founded over 100 years ago, it has become a massive responsibility to maintain connections with our graduates. Our 2025-2029 Strategic Plan committed to strengthening the shared affinities among that ever-growing community. As part of that initiative, Jamie Prey joined our program as our Alumni Relations Officer this spring. In this role, Prey works to reconnect with these 14,000 alumni and learn about their excitement to support Communication Arts.

Whether it's providing a mentorship to a student, creating student internship opportunities, coming to Madison and visiting a class, connecting with other graduates at one of our alumni events, or volunteering at an event like Comm Arts at Work to share your career journey with undergrads, there are numerous ways your support can make direct impacts on our students. Connecting with Prey is the first step to finding the right fit for you.

As a Communication Arts graduate herself, Prey knows how meaningful it is to feel truly connected to the department after leaving campus. Her goal is to spark that connection for more alumni.

"There's so much to be proud of in the department right now. We have cutting edge new classes, students landing incredible internships, and alumni leading in their industries," she said. "This growth is propelled by our alumni. Their real-world insights help shape our classrooms and show students the many exciting paths their own careers might take."

If you are interested in reconnecting with Communication Arts, Prey is eager to hear from you and start a conversation. Feel free to send her an email at jmprey@wisc.edu



Communication Arts Partners (CAPS) gathering in New York City.

Fall 2025 Dean's Message



As the leaves change colors and students return to classes, I'm reminded of what a vibrant community this College is. Every day, I have the opportunity to see the tremendous talent of our students, faculty, alumni and staff. They challenge themselves to do their best, tackle tough questions and do work that will have an impact on this state and the world.

It was inspiring to welcome the Class of 2029 on a stunning day in early September at Memorial Union. They have a bright future ahead of them. What makes a degree from the College of Letters & Science so special, is that we teach our students skills that will propel them in every part of their life. L&S students will enter the workforce knowing how to think critically, problem solve and communicate effectively. They learn what it takes to be in a room with people who think differently than themselves and they are equipped to lead. It is a complex world, but they're learning to adapt, grow and embrace its challenges.

L&S is the heart of this great University. We remain committed to educational excellence and to ensuring that each student has the resources they need to thrive, even as our community continues to grow. That's why we're investing in top talent, state-of-the-art facilities, one-of-a-kind undergraduate research opportunities and programs dedicated to making sure everyone can succeed. It is a privilege to watch our students pay it forward after graduation, as they go on to become world-class researchers, entrepreneurs, thought leaders and humanitarians.

While we enjoy this changing of the seasons and the burst of new energy from our newest students, I'm filled with remarkable pride for this College and the many hearts and minds that are a part of it. So, thank you for continuing to stay connected and being a part of our community.

On Wisconsin!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Eric Wilcots'.

Eric Wilcots, Dean
Mary C. Jacoby Professor of Astronomy
UW-Madison College of Letters & Science



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Please update your contact information in the Alumni Directory by calling (888) WIS-ALUM (947-2586) or emailing your changes to AlumniChanges@uwalumni.com



Communication Arts welcomed three faculty members to the department this fall. From left to right: Professor Matthew Hannah (Digital Studies | Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture); Professor Diana Leon-Boys (Media and Cultural Studies); Visiting Professor Paxton Haven (Media and Cultural Studies). Learn more about each of them here: go.wisc.edu/2025-new-faculty

