Modern science is a highly specialized activity, pursued by trained experts at research labs or universities. But of course, science is not confined to the laboratory or academy. The outcome of scientific research informs and shapes our society and culture at all levels. We encounter science in the media, in museums, or in the courtroom. Politicians, lawyers, and other professionals draw on, assess, and sometimes seek to restrict scientific activity. This course explores how science engages with the public, how the public engages with science, and how the relation between science and the public has changed over time. Beginning in the 18th century, we will focus on three related topics.

The forms of engagement: How are complex scientific issues made palatable to wider audiences? We will survey different forms of science communication, such as popular lectures and magazines, museum displays, novels, and films. We will discuss how audiences’ responses shape the course of science, and whether basic scientific literacy is sufficient to understand and evaluate scientific activity.

The sites of engagement: Where do the exchanges between scientists and public audiences occur? We will consider sites and spaces such as museums and zoos, cabinets of curiosity, lecture halls, court rooms, and mass media. How do these sites facilitate – or perhaps impede – the flow of information?

The purposes and effects of engagement: What are the goals of science communication? Why do scientists, science educators, and science journalists care about what non-scientists think about science? Have these goals changed since the late 18th century? Why might lay audiences engage with science; what are their interests and expectations?