

# KEELE CONCOURSE

Run by students, for students!

## Editorial by P. Horsefield Page 2.

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## Culture by F. Tansley Page 2 & 3.

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## Opinion by J. Budd Page 5.

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## THE SHALLOT

## By Will Drew Page 5—8.

Endorsed by Executive Editor of *The Onion*, Jordan LaFlure, who said in an email to our team wishing us:

**"Best of luck with your project!"**

## Current affairs by T. J. Hayward & G Saji Saji Page 8—10.

T. J. Hayward writes: Walleys quarry has long been viewed with disdain among residents and students in and around the Newcastle-under-Lyme for being the source of a seemingly never-ending torrent of foul odour due to excessive hydrogen sulphide emissions.

G. Saji Saji quotes Palestinian Christian pastor Reverend Munther Isaac about the ceasefire: **"But history will remember where people stood. History will remember what they said. They cannot claim that they did not know."**

## Science & Technology by L. Peiris Page 10-11.

**"Your attention span has become so short you probably won't finish this article."**

It's something we're all aware of - our phone usage. In an era of falling attention spans, brainrot, and a rise in social media-linked mental health issues, the question of what the neuroscience is behind it all, arises. As you read this article, watch how often your mind starts to slip away as your attention span drops.

Shoutout to M. Palm for designing the posters!  
Thanks to A. Gurney for behind the scenes help!

Turn to the back for society news and the personal column!



# Editorial

## Keele Concourse: electric boogaloo

By P. Horsefield, Editor-in-Chief

For a long time, Concourse has been a part of students' lives and instrumental to bringing the news to an otherwise isolated campus university. However, it was on the downturn when the newspaper moved online with no physical copies available (apart from special issues) within the past decade or so, especially after 2020. This was mostly due to the move from physical to digital with earlier editions commenting on "how late" Concourse was to move to an online format. With a less physical presence on campus, and the pandemic rearing its ugly head in 2020, Concourse membership faltered until by mid-2023 there was no active members left. Yet, Concourse had never fully went away.

In 2023, I joined Keele University with a little too much time on my hands and desperately wanted to join all the societies that could convince me (they had freebies on their stall, how could I say no?). This included Concourse, which I kept a keen eye out for as I worked my way through the fresher and society fairs. After a reality check of coursework and exams in late December, my search for Concourse took the back seat.

Fast forward to October 2024, where a friend of mine had been able to get the wheel turning on restarting an old society, which brought Concourse to the forefront of my mind again. Deciding to make the jump and take matters into my own hands, an email was composed and sent to all students within the faculty of natural sciences to see if there would be any interest in a student-led newspaper. I received an influx of emails from students who were very interested in writing for a student newspaper and others who shared my disappointment in there being no active Concourse newspaper. Low and behold, within this faculty alone we were able to gather enough people to put this paper together again.

One such student, Gogul Saji Saji, was able to recruit the last active Editor-in-Chief 2022/2023, Will Drew, who has helped with logistics that I had not even considered such as Concourse Online, social media accounts and other administrative material. With his help and experience, as well as the enthusiasm from the new members, you, the reader, are looking at a new issue of Keele Concourse!

Keele University was founded with this ethos:

"the pursuit of truth in the company of friends," which I hope is still very much relevant to the modern Keele student cohort. Seeming almost inspired by this motto, Keele Concourse's own motto is "Run By students, For students," which has been at the centre of this student-led newspaper since the very beginning. Further on from that, Concourse believe that students should be given the opportunity to express their strife and joys with no intervention from the University. This means that, while we are a Keele Student Union society, we are still an independent newspaper, separate from moderation by any external influences.

It is now up to you, reader, to get in contact with us and you could be the next feature article in a future issue! If writing is not for you, but you still want to bring attention to something you deem important, apply for a personal advert and it will be featured in the next issue. Societies and clubs, do not feel left out as we will be able to have a separate section for all your news and issues.

# Culture

## The Power of Musicals

By F. Tansley, Culture Editor

There's something powerful about hearing an actor sing live. Whilst films can rely on visuals to set a scene, musicals tap into raw unfiltered emotions. There's no time for insignificant dialog, so every spoken word adds depth to a character, and each song enhances both the character's internal conflict and the vivid colours of their world. Musicals have a unique power of blending music and storytelling, crafting moments that are both deeply personal and universally relatable, often staying with us for the rest of our lives.

2025 is an exciting year for the West End and the rest of the UK. New shows coming to the UK include Friends (a musical parody), Clueless, Disney's Hercules and Freaky Friday, Scissorhandz, Anne Boleyn The Musical, Coraline, and Nessie (a musical about the Loch Ness Monster), whilst tours include & Juliet, SIX, Moulin Rouge, Dear Evan Hansen, The Book of Mormon, Chitty Chitty Bang Bang, The Bodyguard, Chicago, Hairspray, and Mamma Mia. Whether you prefer Comedies, Romance, Book or Jukebox Musicals, the new year is bringing something for you!

### & Juliet

& Juliet explores an alternate ending to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. Upset with Juliet's



gruesome end, Anne Hathaway imagines a world, where Juliet didn't kill herself, and instead, flees to Paris with her Nurse, Angelique, her best friend, May, and Anne's persona, April. The four friends crash the party of Angelique's former employer, Lance, and his son, Francois, who serves as a love interest for both Juliet and May. With a soundtrack of upbeat pop songs, & Juliet is light-hearted, comedic fun, whilst also diving into themes of female empowerment and taking control of our own destiny.

Venues: Curve Theatre, Leicester (17-22/02/2025), Theatre Royal, Nottingham (14-19/04/2025), Hippodrome Theatre Birmingham (22/04/2025-03/05/2025), Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent (12-17/05/2025).

## **SIX**

SIX is a modern retelling of the six wives of King Henry VIII, expressed through a short 'pop concert', where the former Queens have a sing-off to determine who suffered the most in their lives. Each Queen takes inspiration from celebrity artists with Catherine of Aragon representing the styles of Beyoncé and Jennifer Hudson, Anne Boleyn as Avril Lavigne and Lily Allen, Jane Seymour – Adele, Sia, and Celine Dion, Anne of Cleves – Nicki Minaj and Rhianna, Katherine Howard – Britney Spears and Ariana Grande, and Catherine Parr representing Alicia Keys and Emeli Sandé. Powerful and dynamic, with comedic notes between the serious, SIX makes for an entertaining evening for any musical's fan.

Venues: Stoke on Trent (15-19/04/2024, Regent Theatre), London (now-30/11/2025, Vaudeville Theatre), Birmingham (11-15/03/2025, Hippodrome Theatre), Leicester (27-31/05/2024, Curve Theatre).

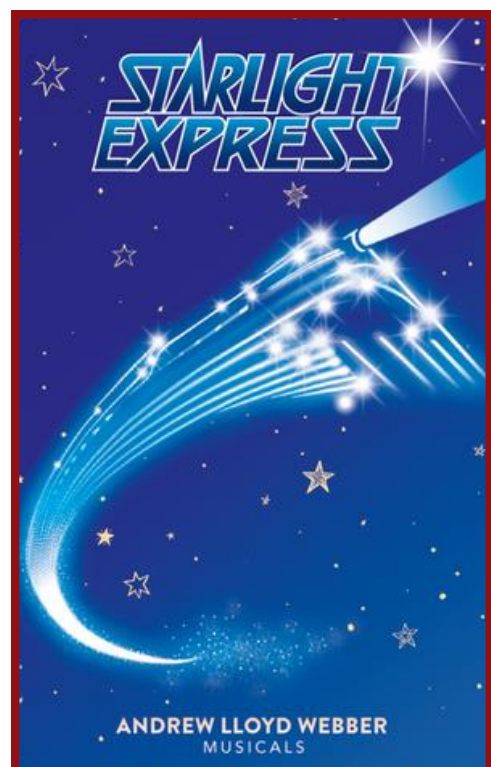
## **Wicked**

A musical based on a book inspired by a film, everybody has heard of the story of Wicked in one way or another. Galinda the Good Witch and Elphaba the Wicked Witch of The West are two witches with a complex relationship and history. Whilst Galinda is blonde and popular, Elphaba is green-skinned and values intelligence and integrity over making allies. The two roommates learn to understand each other on a deeper level, but when they discover their 'Wonderful Wizard's' corrupt government, they are sent on drastically different paths for the rest of their lives. Wicked premiered in the West End in 2006 and has been a staple in their lineup ever since. With catchy songs and lovable characters, it is a must to experience live for all theatre fans, especially after the recent release of the movie.

Venue: Apollo Victoria Theatre, London (now-04/01/2026).

## **Starlight Express**

Starlight Express is a unique experience with the fact that the actors skate around the auditorium. Jeevan Braich and Kayna Montecillo made their professional debuts in the production's revival, playing steam train Rusty and coach Pearl respectively, and have a natural chemistry with each other. The show follows a child's



trains, which come alive and race each other, whilst the child is sleeping. The underdog, Rusty, dreams of winning the race and capturing the heart of the new first-class coach, Pearl. His dreams seem unreachable with rivals, such as Greaseball and Electra, but with the encouragement of his mentor Momma and fan favourite Hydra, Rusty is inspired by the legend of the 'Starlight Express' and never gives up. The soundtrack, available on Spotify, is catchy and well sung, whilst the bright and futuristic costumes were created by the designer of SIX, Gabriella Slade. The way the tracks, stage, and screens are set up means that no seat has a disadvantage in viewing the show, and with a simple and easy to follow plot, Starlight Express can be enjoyed by anyone.

Venue: Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre, London (now-10/2025).

## **Moulin Rouge**

Based on the 2001 film, Moulin Rouge follows the young poet, Christian, who moves to Paris in pursuit of a career in composing. After befriending playwright Toulouse-Lautrec and choreographer Santiago, Christian visits a club to watch a cabaret performer called Satine. It's love at first sight, and Christian spends the rest of the musical attempting to compose them a happy ending. What I remember most about seeing Moulin Rouge are the red lights bathing the stage, and the impressive set, which add to the dramatic and intense atmosphere.

Venues: Piccadilly Theatre, London (purchase tickets up to 5 months in advance), Hippodrome Theatre, Birmingham (15/10/2025-15/11/2025), Palace Theatre, Manchester (20/08-04/10/2025).

# Opinion

## Politics and the Youth

By J. Budd, Politics Correspondent

Politics, it's a dirty word for some, but it's something that is always there whether you like it or not. It exists not just within the halls of Westminster but within our everyday lives. Most decisions we make as individuals are to a certain extent political in nature. It was Pericles, the great Athenian statesman, orator and general who once said, "just because you do not take an interest in politics doesn't mean politics won't take an interest in you". If you want to live freely within society, you must pay taxes and obey the law, these are set out by politicians. Similarly, whenever there is a conflict

within people's everyday lives, the resolution is usually only achieved through political means. In fact, we have leaders claiming constantly to represent the country whether you voted for them or not. Politics isn't an echo chamber but an inevitability of life.

Despite this, over recent years it appears that younger demographics have drifted away from the political process, at least within the traditional sense. Pressure groups such as Just Stop Oil and Extinction Rebellion have seen a rise in support over recent years. So, I set about trying to find out what it is that is making young people disinterested in mainstream politics and how we could go about trying to rectify this. On my search for answers, I enlisted the help of one of the more politically active members of the Keele community, local election hopeful Shauney Connor. I first started off by asking Shauney what it was that first inspired him to get into politics and where it has led him to today. His leap into politics was perhaps slightly emblematic of the wider phenomena surrounding the age at which people begin to become more politically conscious. He himself admits that he 'was a latecomer to the world of politics' at least within the context of someone wanting to seek political office. It was a mixture of both past and present that led him down the path to a lifelong interest in the subject, with it initially coming about through his background of late 20th century British politics via his History A-level, latterly the events of the Boris Johnson premiership further led him to political activism. The truth is that it can be completely random as to when and where someone might get into politics.

Following on from this I asked Shauney why it may be the case that young people perhaps feel alienated from the traditional political process. For him the answer is two-fold. Firstly, that politicians often 'fail to take action on issues that are important to them, including climate change, housing and education'. Often it is the case that politicians miss what truly matters to younger people, whether this is done deliberately in the case of parties trying to win over older voters, or accidentally through a lack of understanding of what young people want prioritised because of a lack of representation. The second issue is that life often gets in the way, 'school, work and financial hardship can push people to put personal agendas ahead of politics'. Younger people often don't have time to think about politics when they are often going about the busiest parts of their life when it comes to commitments. Shauney believes the only way these issues can be tackled is that 'we need to provide easy entry into politics, strengthen youth voices, and show that activism does change things.' There are of course many ways of going about trying to achieve this.

But why should young people get involved? It's quite simple really if young people want greater levels of representation, they must actively try to achieve it.



According to Shauneey a growth in politically active young people can 'resist dated concepts, lobby for change, and hold governments to account. They make democracy stronger, represent it more effectively and make the world a more open and progressive place.' So, there you have it, why not give politics a chance? If you would like to try and see what politics is about there are multiple ways you can do this. Keele University has multiple different political societies of all persuasions looking for

new membership. These often help locally when it comes to canvassing and often have close links to local politicians, as well as the usually social. Alternatively, you could contact your local member of parliament about what really matters to you, all emails are on the gov.uk website. You could even just volunteer for causes that interest you. Change doesn't happen unless you make it happen.

# THE SHALLOT

Jordan LaFlure, Executive Editor of *The Onion*: "you are free to use that name as far as *The Onion* is concerned"

## Students in Chancellor's Building sidelined by alligator pits

"Why are there so many alligators in this building?" This was the question on the minds of multiple students upon being engorged by a hungry congregation of alligators on their way to lectures last semester. Many in the University community have been raising concerns since 2020, when the alligators were introduced as a way to enforce social distancing in Chancellor's building, however their qualms, as well as their screams, have since gone unheard.

A spokesperson from the Student Union claims that "These creatures have served campus life massively, from dealing with the notorious boar problem that plagued us in 2019, to ensuring that double-booked rooms are cleared efficiently by whichever member of staff has more gazelles at hand.

Increasing pressure is being put on university



Alligators swamping the Chancellor's office.

officials to stand down the use of alligators on campus, as many claim that they present a threat to a healthy student mindset. Wes Roding, a second-year Astrophysics student says that on his first lecture back after the winter break he was "Hanging on a slither of free hallway, 'Gators to the left and right of me, I had to 'Crash Bandicoot' my way to the room by hopping on their backs." We later asked Wes how this affected his mental health, but he could not answer, for another alligator had entered the room.

"I get that they didn't want us to crowd the rooms and hallways during the virus, but now things are better and I think the Chancellor has put so much money into their purchase, food, enrichment and medical care that they can no longer justify selling the animals. I think they just like having an alligator pit," said Wes, from the balcony.

Our reporters can confirm that university leadership is considering changing the policy, with talks of a 'Wolf Cavern' gaining significant traction.

## New '50 Bus' will have twice as many levels as the 25

A source from inside the First Bus Service's 'Research and Development' division has outlined plans to cut costs for daily users of the 25 Bus, while doubling capacity. "It's simple really, I don't understand why this hasn't been done before," said spokesperson Dale Speaming, "What we're going to do is essentially add two more floors to our current double-decker models, for a gigantic increase to capacity and a minor decrease to safety."

Experts under the employ of First Bus claim that

The new '50' bus spotted being trialed in an undisclosed location in England.



the 'Quadruple-Decker' will provide transportation for thousands of students upset with the overcrowded 25, with a spiral stairway through all four floors, a lift for disabled commuters, and a race-grade roll cage for those tight corners.

The new '50' will be 20 meters tall and 12 meters long, making it a dynamic addition to the local skyline at any time, day or night. Such expansive heights have brought controversy however, after a prototype model in France led to irreparable damages to the Arc de Triomphe. Local MP Adam Jodge dismissed concerns over property damage, stating "Public infrastructure will not be damaged by the new model, and frankly we don't have anything worth protecting here in Newcastle-under-Lyme."

## Exclusive: The Secret Society postpones going public

Our team were contacted last week by the president and ringleader of Keele's official secret society, to inform us of their postponing their grand reveal.

"The traps are set, influence is secured, now we must wait for the perfect time to make ourselves known," said Theo White (3rd Year Computer Science), emphasising that he and his cabal of anonymous students have put years into their preparations for going public, and that the time is not yet ripe for phase two.

"We've been influencing Union elections, paying off lecturers, even bribing security to allow us to operate in the basement of the Walter Moberly building, where

we have built a nefarious shrine to our dark lord Baphomet. Alas, the time is not right, so we shall keep to the shadows for now."

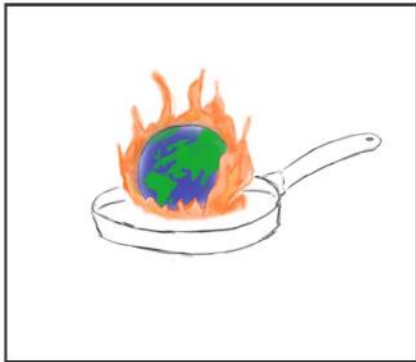
Our reporters met with the clandestine group over a disappointing danish pastry in an anonymous location within Chapters Cafe, where the societies' plans were outlined. "We have a mole in the committee of the Taylor Swift Society, consolidating their grip on power as we speak, soon we will have an agent in a position of power everywhere on campus. Really, the only thing that could stop us now is if some idiot reveals us to the world before our plans are expedited."

## UPDATE

As an addendum to the previous article, *the Shalot* would like to express our sincere condolences for the author, who disappeared two weeks ago. He has since been replaced by a trustworthy and pious servant of the dark lord.



Theo White, far left, with his Secret Society.



### Frog Fact Corner!

The coolest thing about the Darwin's Frog is not even the fact that it looks like a fallen leaf, it's the lengths the male Darwin's Frog would go to protect their eggs. The male Darwin's Frog will protect their eggs until they start to move. Once they start to move, the frog will swallow them and store them in the vocal sac. Eventually the eggs will hatch into tadpoles, but even then, will still remain in the male Darwin's Frog voice sac. only when the tadpoles have gone all the way through metamorphosis and developed into little frogs will they all hop out of the male Darwin's Frog's mouth.



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## Repping my landlord

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A safe space to express your most sincere concerns about your most beloved landlords! These opinions have been collected recently and reflect the honesty and sincerity of *the Shallot* news section.

**Dear Landlord,** please remember to remind us when you will be visiting with potential new tenants. We did not have enough time to put our under construction Boeing 737 away. This made the house tour quite unbearable as there wasn't enough legroom.

Yours, Tenants

**Dear Landlord,** please can you send someone to repair our boiler. Upon turning it on for the first time last year, we found that the boiler was not connected to the rest of the house. The impromptu stream room that was created is great for our skin however, has not been great

for the wallpaper.

Yours, Tenants

**Dear landlord,** we remember you mentioned that the house was built on an unmarked grave site. The nightly hauntings of slamming doors and flickering lights have been bearable until Halloween last year. The undead have since risen and are living in our conservatory, not to be too forward but will affect our deposit?

Yours, Tenants

**Dear Landlord,** thank you for the very reasonable and competitive rates on our place. The bills include a rather liquid range of services and one slight issue is that Wednesday nights can be particularly loud. Despite this, if it is still available for next year, would we be able to continue to our tenancy at the Squirrel bar?

Yours, Tenants

Thank you to our readers that submitted letters for repping their landlords!

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## Current affairs

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Newcastle-Under-Lyme

### Stop the Stink: Successful!

By T. J. Hayward, Politics Editor

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Walleys quarry has long been viewed with disdain among residence and students in and around the Newcastle-under-Lyme for being the source of a seemingly never-ending torrent of foul odour due to excessive hydrogen sulphide emissions.

On the 28th of November of 2024 the Environment agency issued the quarry a notice to stop receiving new landfill waste, citing that "management of Walleys Quarry is poor and that further operation of the site may result in significant long-term pollution." The site was bleeding hydrogen sulphide, a toxic gas that causes respiratory issues to those that inhale it and has a distinctive eggy smell. The closure notice has (obviously) been appealed by Walleys quarry, with the appeal submitted on the 6th of December 2024. They have publicly disputed the claim made of poor management of the site in their immediate response to the closure notice being issued.

In 2016 hydrogen sulphide monitoring equipment was installed on the site by the Environment agency however the monitors were under-reporting the concentration of hydrogen sulphide until a random audit

on the 21st of August 2023 (Fantastic work spotting the issue in a timely manner...) where it was found that "the issue arose from a misunderstanding about the calibration procedures when we purchased the new analysers in 2016." according to the environment agency. While Walleys quarry has been making progress to solve these problems, not enough has been done as seen in the compliance clarification scheme in which in 2023 they scored 251.1, a whole 101.1 points higher than the minimum to be placed into the worst bracket for compliance (For context the highest single score you can receive for "a non-compliance associated with a major impact on human health, quality of life or the environment." is 60 points).

Since the notice of closure was issued to Walleys quarry work has proceeded on the site to cap off areas of the site that had any exposed landfill and gas collection infrastructure has been installed, as mandated by the closure notice, which is being done. This work has also led to further hydrogen sulphide emissions as explained in a (very passive aggressive) press release on 11th of December 2024 "Walleys Quarry is not able to import wastes including waste soil to form these benches [Platforms for gas collection infrastructure to rest upon] or use waste soil that is already stockpiled on site to form them the Agency has compelled us to take the unusual step of cutting into already emplaced waste to create them." The cutting into pre-existing landfill disturbs any resting waste and can liberate any previously trapped hydrogen sulphide gas.

It is not known at the time of writing when works will be completed due to adverse weather conditions in the form of snow which will have delayed works in the





The stink rising from Walleys quarry.

capping of landfill so there may well be quite a while of the stink lingering despite the closure notice.

Palestine

## What a Cease-fire could mean for Palestinians

By G. Saji Saji, Current Affairs Correspondent

After 15 months of war, both sides have agreed to a historic 3-stage ceasefire deal that could end the conflict. Stage one began on January 19th, with Hamas exchanging 3 Israeli hostages for 90 prisoners. While Western media focuses on the hostages, little attention has been given to the utterly complicated mess left in Gaza and offered little perspective on its future or what it has lost—topics we will explore today.

The drumming of quadcopters and gunfire fades, promising a supposed end to airstrikes and faster aid to feed the hungry and heal the wounded. Celebrations erupted in Gaza and the West Bank, but joy is tempered by the trauma of the past year.

The entire population is mourning the deaths of their loved ones and the complete destruction of their homes. War has wiped out entire family lineages. The UN reports, as of January 14th, 46,645 deaths and about 92% of Gaza's homes destroyed. Around 200 of the estimated 10,000 bodies in the rubble have been found thus far.

According to the World Health Organisation, only half of Gaza's 36 hospitals remain partially operational, and about 30,000 people face life-changing injuries requiring ongoing rehabilitation.

Israel is still maintaining its blockade on imports into Gaza, which prevents the necessary scale of aid from being delivered. Around 897 trucks entered yesterday, which is still not enough to meet the needs. The UN has also stated that, with the blockade in place, it may take more than 350 years to rebuild. Israel is unlikely to take away the blockade without the disposal of Hamas.

Estimates of Gaza's damages range from \$40-80 billion, with 50 million tons of rubble requiring over 15 years to clear, using 100 trucks working full time, at a cost of at least \$1.2 billion. International donors are unlikely to invest in a region that has seen 5 wars in less than two decades. The sheer enormity of the responsibility, the price tag, and the lack of political pressure are why we do not even know if Gaza will be rebuilt. Any names of possible donors for rebuilding have all just been theoretical. Gideon Rachman, writer at the UK's Financial Times stated that he has heard EU officials say that Europe will not pay for the reconstruction of Gaza and that the US Congress also seems to be turning against foreign assistance. And in the past, many states have pledged funding and not met them, so there is no real plan for Gaza in this regard.

This all may mean that tent camps, acute poverty, catastrophic famine and the essentials of life delivered in measly amounts in trucks may be a permanent fixture in Gaza for many years to come.

The Palestinian struggle has more attention than ever, but hope feels pointless amid the ongoing suffering. But despite this. Despite the lack of intervention and the ignorance of both the elites and the common man, hope still persists in Palestine. I leave you

with a snippet from a Christmas sermon by Palestinian Christian pastor Reverend Munther Isaac in Bethlehem:

"We have not and will not lose hope," "Yes, it is 76 years of an ongoing *Nakba* [ethnic cleansing], but it is also 76 years of Palestinian *sumud* [steadfastness], clinging to our rights and the justice of our cause."

"The genocide will end one day," "But history will remember where people stood. History will remember what they said. They cannot claim that they did not know."

Palestine

## The Current War

By G. Saji Saji, Current Affairs Correspondent

As of December 31st, a recent UN report recorded 45,541 Palestinian deaths and 108,338 injuries since the attacks in October 2023. However, the actual figures are likely much higher, with an estimated 10,000 people still missing or trapped under rubble. On the Israeli side, fatalities have surpassed 1,200, with over 5,400 reported injuries. Both death tolls include soldiers and civilians.

According to UN reports, this marks an increase of approximately 2,800 Palestinian deaths in just two months since October 2, 2024. An average of 250 Palestinians were killed daily by the IDF in January 2024 according to Oxfam, they described it as 'the bloodiest rate of death in any conflict over the past 24 years'.

Over 1.9 million Palestinians have been displaced, which is 90% of the population of Gaza. Israel justifies this displacement on security and military grounds, asserting that they have taken the requisite steps to safeguard civilians. However, many argue that Israel has failed to meet its obligations in this regard. Under international law, Israel is required to facilitate the return of displaced Palestinians to their homes where hostilities have ceased but this is impossible knowing that entire regions have been flattened.

Israel's actions have directly contributed to severe shortages of essential resources. Food systems have been decimated, with 70% of crop fields destroyed, and water, sanitation, and health services have completely collapsed. Currently, 1.84 million people across Gaza face high levels of acute food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 or above), including 345,000 in Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5). Acute malnutrition has soared to levels ten times higher than before the escalation of hostilities. These shortages are contributing factors to the ICC conviction of Netanyahu and his ex defense minister.

Evacuations carried out by Israel have also faced significant criticism. The Human Rights Watch has condemned these operations, stating that the instructions given were 'unclear, inaccurate, and

contradictory,' leaving people insufficient time to move through active conflict zones. They further claim that evacuation routes were attacked, undermining efforts to ensure Palestinian safety. They have concluded that, 'no destination within Gaza was safe.'

## Science & Technology

### Scrolling vs Substances: The Neuroscience Behind Social Media Usage

By L Peiris, Science and Technology Editor

Your attention span has become so short you probably won't finish this article.

It's something we're all aware of - our phone usage. In an era of falling attention spans, brainrot, and a rise in social media-linked mental health issues, the question of what the neuroscience is behind it all, arises. As you read this article, watch how often your mind starts to slip away as your attention span drops.

Since the introduction of social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat, social media has become a key part of how we navigate modern life. Humans are naturally social beings who have always sought out connection and community, and these platforms have transformed the way humans connect with each other, creating communities over shared interests and maintaining communication over long distances, all accessible from a metal box kept in your back pocket. Beyond connection, Social media provides entertainment, distraction, and relaxation.

However, with many positives come negatives. Social media has been proven to have complex effects on brain function, relationships, and academic performance. According to Dr Gloria Mark in 2023, our average attention span duration dropped 70% since 2004.

How many times have you found yourself zoning out when your lecturer starts making no sense, and you find yourself reaching for a scroll or two on social media? It's easy to become distracted whilst learning, due to easily accessible distractions at your fingertips. Research shows that social media usage can impact academic performance as students are less satisfied with receiving higher grades than they used to be. We require higher levels of dopamine and therefore receive less gratification when seeing an 'A'. This may discourage

students from doing well in class and lead to a depletion in high academic performance.

## **The Neuroscience Behind It**

So what exactly is dopamine and why does it have such a notable influence on us?

Dopamine is a type of neurotransmitter, widely recognised as the “feel good” neurotransmitter, produced in the substantia nigra and the arcuate nucleus of the hypothalamus of the brain. It is part of the brain’s reward system and, when released, gives us the feeling of temporary pleasure (PMC 2015). Dopamine was described as a part of reinforcement according to Stephanie Watson, an editor at Harvard (2024). This explains why we go back for one more scroll, another, and another.

There are many dopaminergic stimuli integrated into social media algorithms- from the unpredictability of posting and waiting to go viral, floods of likes and comment notifications, sparking validation, and infinite feeds catered to your exact preferences, each of these releasing a ‘feel-good’ message to the brain. Social media algorithms have been designed to be as addictive as possible, to maximise engagement by leveraging psychological tactics and exploiting the brain’s reward systems to ensure users stay engaged. For instance, TikTok’s previous app design hid the clock on the top of screens so users were unable to track their app usage duration.

Unfortunately, this constant exposure to an overload of dopamine-rich content comes at a cost - the brain reacts to this surge by reducing dopamine transmission in an attempt to neutralise it. However, this reduction often passes and dips below the brain’s baseline level for dopamine activity. As heavy social media users are repeatedly exposed to dopamine-filled feeds, they can enter a chronic dopamine-deficit state, lessening their ability to experience pleasure.

## **Scrolling vs Substances**

Arguably the most accessible ‘substance’, scrolling has become the new ‘high’ as users have become increasingly dependent on it. It’s easily reachable at your fingertips at any time, with no barriers to its accessibility. Interestingly, the way the brain is impacted by social media usage is scarily similar to the use of drugs. Likewise to dopamine spiking in the brain due to social media, Dr Osman Shabir (Jan 4, 2020) explained how ingested drugs lead to a cyclic release of dopamine in the brain. Cocaine and heroin are dopamine transporter blockers, which increase the presence of dopamine. The normal baseline for dopaminergic neuron firing is 5Hz, but with cocaine and heroin use this leads to high neuronal firing fast bursts of around > 30Hz. As previously stated, social media may cause neuronal firing

to differentiate from the baseline rate. An important note to remember, however, is that just because a person uses social media, or uses intoxicants such as drugs, does not mean they will develop an addiction.

## **Relationships and ‘phubbing’**

A discussion about social media and the digital world cannot be had without addressing the impact it has in the physical world and real life interactions. Do you ever find yourself speaking to a peer then realising they’ve picked up their phone mid conversation? Phubbing, or ‘phone snubbing’ is a new term that describes this effect - a result of a fall in attention spans due to digital devices. A study by VitalSmarts (March 18, 2014) shows that almost 90% of people have reported that their relationships have deteriorated due to insensitive use of technology. According to this group, friends or family members would lose focus and stop engaging with them at least once a week due to their devices. Though online communication is stronger than ever through social media, it has dismantled the quality of real-life interactions, often leaving people feeling undervalued and disconnected. In this new digital age, phones have become a reliable, constant companion, but at what cost? The inability of being able to stay present in conversations leaves peers feeling isolated, and this gap may be filled with even more social media usage, and so the cycle continues, affecting emotional bonds. It is important to acknowledge that though social media is a valuable tool for communication, it is a double-edged sword that can also hinder meaningful connection.

This issue has sparked conversation around our need for boundaries in our relationship with technology. In France, the El Khomri law, presented in 2016, included ‘the right to disconnect’. This involved workers’ regulation for the use of digital technology outside working hours, ensuring respect for personal and family life. This law is pivotal in developing boundaries not only between work life and home life but also with the digital and physical world, limiting workers’ needs for constant connectivity.

The use of social media harms and helps equally, from offering valuable means of entertainment and communication, to dopamine deficits and physical disconnection. In this new, ever-growing digital age, it’s crucial to set boundaries and be mindful of tech usage. If you’ve successfully reached the end of this article, congratulations, you beat the urge to scroll and lengthened your attention span long enough to get the full picture- who knows? Maybe there’s hope for our attention spans after all.

# Society news

## SPARK is BACK!

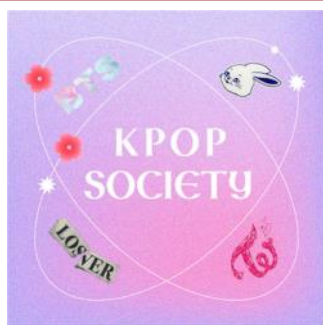
The Society for Physics, Astrophysics, and Rocketry has returned to Keele. We are competing in the National rocketry championship this year, and we are organising trips to introduce people to model rocketry and the growing space industry.

Follow SPARK on Instagram @keele.spark and scan the QR code for the link to SPARK's SU Website!

SPARK



## K-Pop society!



We host bi-weekly dance classes and weekly mini game & chat events which provides a space to meet likeminded people in a fun and light-hearted environment. In the past, we have hosted random play dances, cup sleeve events, SU nights, concert watch parties, deco events, and more.

We're currently planning another cup sleeve event this coming February. Working together with DJ Emkay, we plan to bring back another K-pop takeover to the SU.

Follow our Instagram to stay up to date for upcoming events and

socials @keelekpopociety!



## KLAW!



We are Keele Literature and Writing Society and we meet on Mondays in Chancellor's building to write and share creative ideas based on different weekly themes. People from all academic backgrounds are welcome! It's an inclusive and chill

environment free to join.

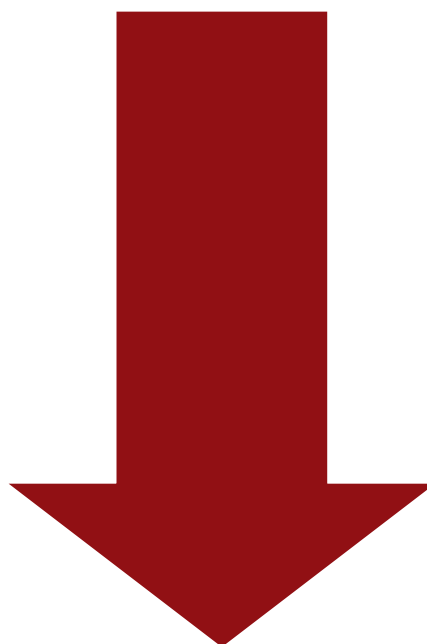
You can reach us via the SU webpage or on Instagram at @keelelitandwriting\_soc!



# Personal ads

This section is where you can send in anything to promote or bring attention to. The QR code at the bottom of the page will take you to a google form where you can submit an advert for future editions of Concourse. If you are writing on behalf of a society please contact us on Instagram @keele\_concourse and we will be able to accommodate you!

Do not be shy!



Send in your problems, solutions or general questions on the form via the QR code, and our *Concourse* team will respond to them the best we can!

