

EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

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9. Media Messaging about Education Reform: Interview with Yousra Allam

*Linda Herrera*¹

Abstract

Yousra Allam served as the Marketing and Communication Advisor to H.E. the Minister of Education and Technical Education Dr. Tarek Shawki from 2017 to 2022. The communication to the public was complicated since the reform contained several components including a new curriculum, tablets for all students entering high school (Grade 10), the integration of digital resources, and changing modes of assessments. The team worked with private marketing, advertising, and media agencies to ensure their message would reach most of the geographical areas in the country. Through television, newspapers, online news, and social media platforms, they tailored their message to different social groups and generations.

Keywords

advertising, communication, Covid-19, Facebook, Instagram, marketing, social media, tablets, WhatsApp

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- 1 This interview took place on 11 March 2020 at the Ministry of Education and Technical Education in Cairo. Many thanks to the members of the Education 2.0 Research and Documentation team who supported this interview. Hany Zayed and Nairy AbdElShafy helped with background research, questions, and transcribing the interview, and Mostafa Hanafi and Ahmed Alaa Abulwafa made the audio and video recording.

1. Joining the Minister's Team



Fig. 9.1 The advisors to Dr. Tarek Shawki, Minister of Education and Technical Education, Cairo, 2018. Yousra Allam is in the first row, second from left. Photo courtesy of Nelly El Zayat.

LH Can you briefly describe your position?

YA² I am the advisor to the Minister for Marketing and Communication. In brief, I am trying to translate the Ministry's vision and strategy to the public with very simple messaging.

LH How did you come to know the Minister Tarek Shawki, and what made you want to join his advisory team?

YA I met Dr. Tarek Shawki when I was enrolled in the Presidential Leadership Program (PLP). He is the one who interviewed me. When he became the Minister of Education and Technical Education, he asked if I could help in this role. Actually, I was eight months pregnant (laughs) when he asked me to join his team. He explained the vision for the new education system, and I got really excited. When I was in school, fifteen or twenty years ago, I used to memorize

2 Dr. Yousra Allam served as Advisor to the Minister of Education and Technical Education for Marketing and Political Communication from 2017-2022. For more information, see her profile on LinkedIn: <https://eg.linkedin.com/in/yousra-allam-256a2374>

everything. They were literally spoon-feeding us. After the exams we forgot everything. I did not learn well until I joined the university. It was there that I started to explore many new things like life skills, critical thinking, creative thinking, and so on. I wondered why I had not learned those things when I was younger? It might have changed a lot in my character. So, when Dr. Tarek explained the vision and framework of the new education system, that it consisted of personal skills, creative thinking, negotiation skills, empathy, cooperation, I knew this would help the students, especially when they started their working life.

I joined the team two weeks after giving birth. Dr. Tarek was surprised that I joined so quickly. But really, I did it because I had a very huge passion for this reform and for his belief in changing the education system. I did not want to miss any part of it. I was so excited to come back to work, to see the impact of the reform and how he would manage this huge shift (see Fig. 9.1).

LH Since you joined the team just two weeks after having your first child, how have you been managing your work, life, motherhood balance?

YA It has not been easy at all. At first, I would come to work for four or five hours per day. Gradually, I started to increase my hours. Luckily, I did not feel any of the post-partum depression that comes to some women. Maybe I can advise all mothers to go back to work as quickly as they can. I wanted to feel that I am doing something for the society, and that has been very rewarding for me. Doing things other than the mommy life gives you an empowering feeling that would help you to move on. I want my daughter to see that yes, her mom worked for something, for the children of Egypt.

2. Background in Advertising and Marketing

LH Prior to joining the Minister's team, you had been working in the private sector in marketing and advertising. Did that work prepare you for a position in the government sector?

YA I used to work in multinationals. I was so worried about joining the governmental sector and wondered if it was a good career move. I was not

sure it would fit my previous experience, but I have definitely gained a lot of experience and it has provided opportunities for a lot of networking.

LH What kind of marketing and advertising work had you been doing?

YA I was at the Leo Burnett advertising company for about five years. I worked on Nestlé Food and Nestlé Waters. Do you remember we used to have the Baraka water in Egypt? It was a very square bottle with pyramids in red and yellow. It was not a very friendly or cool bottle, and it appealed more to an older generation. We wanted to do a brand revamp and target the younger generation. We conducted a lot of focus groups to ask them why they were not buying Baraka but other brands. Actually, Nestlé Waters owns Nestlé Pure Life and Baraka water. Many people we talked with said, ‘When I drink Baraka, I don’t feel hydrated, I still feel that I want to drink more water’. The salt taste, the TDS (total dissolved solids) was very high. That is why we changed the salt percentage and revamped the bottle. I also worked on some L’Oréal products, mainly Garnier hair color and some skin products targeting the B and C class.³ I also worked on some kinds of medicines with Novartis. I did the launches for new Maggi spices for kofta and other things. I also worked on Cerelac baby food. After that, I headed campaigns in the marketing department. I stayed there for five years until I joined Dr. Tarek’s team three years ago. And now, in addition to my work with Dr. Tarek, I am teaching Marketing and Entrepreneurship part-time at the New Giza University.

LH Has your experience in marketing and advertising helped you with your work as communication advisor to the Minister of Education?

YA Yes, because during my corporate life I communicated with target clients from different socioeconomic classes. I used to make field visits to people living in very underdeveloped areas. I got to know their mindset, how they think, their perspectives on things and so on. When I joined the team here, I knew how to communicate a specific message to very targeted segments of the society. I try to make sure that our language is as simple as possible to reach different groups so that they understand the major shifts in the new education system.

³ See below for a definition of these classes.

LH You recently completed your Ph.D. in Communication and Media Studies from Cairo University. Has your doctoral research given you tools to improve the communication strategy at the Ministry of Education?

YA My topic was on media reform and how to produce a benchmark that the Egyptian Media System could follow. Egypt has been in a transitional phase for a long period, and a benchmark would help it move out of this phase. I looked at case studies from many countries like Poland, Hungary, Russia, and Germany to see how they shifted from an authoritarian type of media system to a more liberal media model. I wanted to see the best practices we could have in Egypt. We obviously cannot copy and paste a media model, and that is exactly the case in education. We cannot take a curriculum from Singapore or somewhere and apply it here in Egypt, it will not work. Each country has its own behavior, culture, and audience. So, we must shape a media reform to match the Egyptian culture. That is what I worked on in my Ph.D.

I definitely found ways to apply my research to education. I am interested in countries that have media literacy for school children. I found out, for instance, that in Germany they start educating children about media literacy from the time they are in nursery school. Can you imagine? They tell them: 'This kind of information you can believe, and this one you cannot'. From first grade they teach them about sources and making sure they are credible sources. Teachers have media training every six months in Germany because the media environment is so dynamic. I have a long chapter about media literacy in Egypt and how we can adapt it here. And luckily, in the new education curriculum, we have a subject for media literacy. So, it is very interesting.

3. Communication Strategy for Different Generations

LH What is your overall communication strategy? How do you cater to different groups and audiences in Egypt?

YA We depend on all different types of media channels, because in Egypt the audiences are so fragmented. If you are talking about the generation of sixty years and above, they still read newspapers and watch television. If you are talking about generations twenty years and under, they are always on social media. We use the Ministry of

Education Facebook and Instagram accounts. The ones in the middle go to online news. So, we are usually trying to tackle or to talk across all media channels to reach the whole population because the education system is not only impacting a certain age or a certain social class, it affects all the generations.

We thought it would be best for the Minister to directly explain the theory behind his vision about changing the new education system. When we depend on a journalist, sometimes they miss a keyword that might make a huge shift in the meaning. The Minister himself is the only spokesperson to explain the idea of the new education system. He has been on many different channels and shows, every single channel that you can imagine, targeting A class, B class, and C class audiences. Initially, he went on radio and television talk shows once or twice per week to explain the new education reform in a very detailed and deep way. He also gets his message across through his own Facebook page and the Ministry of Education Facebook page.

LH What do you mean by A, B and C class audiences?

YA In Egypt you have a very fragmented media. The media is classified into certain channels targeting different social income groups. We wanted to make sure that his message and his vision gets disseminated across all people in the society. That is why we arranged a media schedule for him to talk in every channel and to elaborate the new education system in detail. For every segment of the population, he has his own language, or he speaks their own language. In the A class media, they want to understand why we are changing the education system and how that would be helpful for their children. Other channels targeting B or C class, they want to know why it is more useful for their children to go to school instead of working or staying at home. So, each socioeconomic category has its own mindset and interests. We wanted to speak their language and convince them that the new education system is for the sake of their children. Our goal has been to reach every home, every family, every parent, to let them understand our vision and for them to be our ambassadors. Here in Egypt, we have the word-of-mouth concept, and the snowball effect is very common. We wanted to convince the parents themselves that we are doing something for the sake of their children, and we are changing the new education system for them.

LH This education reform is novel for Egypt and has many components. You have a new curriculum and books for the early years of primary school, changes to the questions for the Thanaweya Amma exam, and new digital tools and platforms. The public often seems confused about what is happening. What kind of strategy has the Minister's office put together to explain these different changes?

YA We have faced a lot of criticism from all over the population. In the beginning they were saying it is impossible to change the education system, that it will not work. Actually, when Dr. Tarek spoke to some of the television anchors and explained the new system, they did not believe it would happen in Egypt. They doubted that the curriculum would be completely changed. Or they would say that we are just getting an American curriculum and replanting it here. But that is not the case at all. That is why we depend on the Minister himself to be the messenger. We also call on Dr. Nawal Shalaby, the Head of the Curriculum Center in the Ministry of Education (CCIMD). She explains how we are using a new terminology like 'weave the curriculum' (*bindafar al-manahij*). She says that 'we weave the curricula to suit the Egyptian student'. She has also been explaining how we adapt concepts and frameworks of international entities to suit our Egyptian context. We also make short documentaries about how the CCIMD is working on the new curriculum and we play these on the talk shows. So, in the first year we started to gain the people's trust. They started to believe that yes, we are really changing the books and are going to start with the new system on time (in September 2018).

We also participate in many conferences. Dr. Tarek gave a speech at the Presidential Conference about the new education reform and showed the new 2.0 books. People have started to feel yes, we are achieving our promise. And the President himself supports the new education reform, and this gives us a lot of backing and credibility.

LH Do you use professional marketing companies to help with the messaging?

YA Definitely yes. A research agency used to help us, even during the tablet distribution. We also use marketing agencies, advertising agencies, and media agencies. The research companies here in Egypt help us to make sure we are getting out the right message and reaching

most of the geographical areas. They are concerned with doing in-depth interviews, focus groups, field visits, and so on. Data collection is not something that you do while sitting in your office. You have to go to different places and interact with people. They go to schools and do on-the-ground analysis and surveys. You know, people's facial expressions are crucial, body language, how they perceive new things and so on. That is why I wanted to apply the strategies from market research here in the Ministry.

We also held competitions for students from Grades 10, 11 and 12, like research competitions. The point was for them to get resources from the Egyptian Knowledge Bank and do a research paper. The Minister visited students while they were taking a training. He also announced the scholarship winners during the closing ceremony. These were scholarships to study in Italy or private universities here in Egypt. It was a very exciting experience for them, and they felt very close to the Minister.

LH People in Egypt use WhatsApp a lot. Do you use it to send messages or communicate to the public?

YA It is very hard to communicate to the public through WhatsApp. However, the Minister himself is active on WhatsApp and Facebook. He wants to communicate to the people directly. Since he is a very down to earth person, he replies by himself. He even sometimes replies on Facebook when someone he does not know asks him a question. When I was at university, Facebook was booming but I never thought to text a professor or send him a message or anything. But Dr. Tarek is really communicating with people very easily, very openly (see Chapter 2 in this volume).

4. Messaging about Digital Transformation

LH When the new education system started to be rolled out in 2018, the media attention seemed especially fixated on the tablets for students in Grade 10, and later, the first electronic exam which did not go so well. How did you manage communication with the public on these topics?

YA In the beginning, before we distributed tablets to the students in Grade 10, many people were saying that students, especially the ones in Upper Egypt and rural areas, would not be able to work on a tablet,

they were not prepared. They said the tablets would get broken, lost, things like that. Nowadays students learn things on social media and online very easily, maybe more quickly than their parents. It is crucial to give them the tools to learn, or to put them on the path where they can excel. We made some infographic videos on how to start using and benefiting from the tablets and we broadcast them on TV and social media. These videos showed how to access different resources available on the Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB) and how it would serve them. The students are teenagers and online 24/7, so we wanted to reach them in the places where they are spending time. We found many people sharing and cross-posting these videos, and they went very viral. There were like millions of sharing posts about the tablets. It was huge.

The first electronic exam definitely had some problems.⁴ But this is very normal in any new initiative. When you try something for the first time it might have some problems, technical issues and so on. Yes, we witnessed a lot of critiques during this period. Initially people said, 'How come the Ministry is not prepared' and so on. However, the problems were fixed, and the system functioned very normally after that. Most of the students took the exam digitally. When the online system did not work in some places the students had a hard copy paper. So, we wanted to reassure them that if one system does not work there is a backup. They should not worry about it. The Minister talked to the students directly in a more emotional video message he posted on social media. In this case we wanted to communicate to the students themselves not their parents, not their teachers, not anyone else. We wanted a message, a very simple emotional message from the Minister to the students.⁵

We also conducted interviews with the students. We brought students from different schools and very different governorates to the Ministry. We asked them questions, such as about how they feel about having the tablet, what do they expect from it, and so on. In the

4 On 24 and 25 March 2019, about 600,000 students in Grade 10 took their first experimental exams (Arabic, Biology), using the tablets. Due to the volume of activity, the servers lagged and eventually the system crashed. Student grades were not affected since these were 'test' tests. The technical problems were eventually resolved in time for the official exams in May 2019, though some students demonstrated against this new system of electronic exams (Morsy 2019).

5 See the Minister's message to the Thanaweya Amma students recorded on 20 June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWiVT9Gmn7E>

beginning some of them were afraid that they might not be able to use it, or maybe the system might not work during the exams. But then they started to explore things by themselves. This is human nature. Their answers helped us in developing the script for the infographic videos for social media

LH Is part of your job to manage the image and communication behavior of the Minister himself?

YA Well, this is very good question and a hard question (laughs). Actually, people here in Egypt want to feel that the Minister is like them. They want to see him speaking a lot to them, whether on social media, talk shows, or in person. They want to see him a lot on school visits. For instance, he was recently in Sohag⁶ visiting one of the schools for disabled children. With school visits like this, we disseminate photos and news and sometimes they go viral. We also want people to see how the Minister is very down to earth. Students approach him when he is out shopping or something, and they talk with him and take selfies. He once told us about how a student in Grade 11 (in 2018) told him she wanted to be in Grade 10 to be able to get a tablet and benefit from the Egyptian Knowledge Bank. Sometimes we have conferences for students, and he spends a lot of time with them taking pictures and chatting.

LH Through these different media strategies, do you think you have been able to convince a good segment of the public about the value of the education reforms and why these changes have been made? How can you gauge if these media strategies are effective?

YA The truth is that most Egyptians do not actually like the old education system. We inherited a situation where many students did not want to go to school because they were not learning well. They preferred to stay at home or work to support the family income. The parents wanted something new that matches today's life. But, when we announced that we were going to have a reform for a new education system, most of them resisted. They fear change, especially when it comes to their children. So, even though parents say, 'Yes, it is better to

6 Sohag is a governorate in Upper Egypt situated on the West Bank of Nile Valley, about 470km from Cairo and 6km southwest of Achmim.

change the education system', when we started to change it they said, 'No, no, no, I got used to the old system'.

In the beginning it was especially shocking for all of them. It has been very difficult and challenging for us to change the mindset of the parents. We needed to clarify to parents and the public why we were changing the system and moving in a different direction. We needed to let them know that with the new education system we would be teaching the children life skills, how to live, how to eat healthy, how to cooperate with people, and so on. With time, especially for parents with children in the early grades (kindergarten to Grade 3), they started getting used to it. We are getting more positive feedback. Nowadays, parents are calling and asking the Ministry to accelerate the new education system because they see the impact on their younger children.

5. A Day on the Job

LH Can you describe a typical day on the job?

YA First thing in the morning, I have to go through any news about education, any critiques. I check social media to see if anything happened related to any school, any student, or any problem. I spend the first half an hour checking everything, doing my own research for the day. And then, depending on the situation, if something happened, we talk to the team and see how we can solve this, or how we can move forward. Other than that, if it is normal day, we have meetings with our partners. We have an internal meeting for things to follow up on, and we make plans for how to get engaged more with the students and parents. It depends.

Before I started working in the governmental sector, I thought that we will go home early, by 3:00 or 4:00 p.m. maximum. I thought the hours would be much shorter than in the advertising or marketing agency and I would go home early. But I stay at work longer hours than I used to in multinational agencies. It is not an easy job. You have a lot of responsibilities. But when you feel that you are doing something for a huge number, we have more than twenty million students, even if you are doing a very, very small part, you get a rewarding feeling.

LH We are talking here, face-to-face, as the global news is all about the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Schools in different countries have been closing and there is huge public concern. How is this ministry communicating about this crisis?

YA Closing schools is a country-level decision. It is not only the decision of the Ministry of Education. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Health will weigh in on this decision. That is why His Excellency Dr. Tarek had a call yesterday with all UNESCO offices worldwide. He wanted to hear about the coronavirus in each country and what is happening with schools. He is really an active person and has a very good network with all entities. He is always looking out for the sake for the children and wants the best for them. People were getting really worried about schools being open and they were spreading rumors. We started to see many hashtags like 'No to education' and 'Our children's health'. The Minister wanted to calm people down. Two days ago, Dr. Tarek had telephone interviews with many anchors asking about what would happen with schools with the outbreak of the virus. His main goal was to calm down the mommies. He asked them to stop talking on social media and spreading rumors. He said, 'I know you are very worried about your children, but don't go on social media where there is fake news. If there is any news, I will tell you myself'. He was very emotional and direct in his message. So, that is an example of the kind of messages he is always trying to spread.

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9. Companion Video

Video 9.1 Youstra Allam: 'Media Strategy for Education Reform in Egypt', Interview by Linda Herrera, Education 2.0 Research and Documentation Project, 11 March 2020, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mpnNOq8UQM>