

EDUCATION 2.0

CHRONICLES OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL CHANGE IN EGYPT

EDITED BY
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22. Making Education Entertaining: Interview with Mai Magdy

*Linda Herrera*¹

Abstract

When schools across the country closed during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education hired a production company to produce and disseminate class lessons via television and YouTube. The two channels, Madrasatna 1 (for Grades 4-6) and Madrasatna 2 (for Grades 7-9) would become the Ministry's media arm to support the idea of an 'open school'. Madrasatna 3 later followed for Thanaweya Amma revisions for Grade 12. Mai Magdy, the General Manager of Madrasatna TV, Sky Production, talks about the process of working with public school teachers to recreate classes for television. She reflects on the responsibilities and rewards of producing video for educational purposes and talks about the need for more children's educational programming or 'entertaining education'.

Keywords

distance learning, children's programming, edutainment, influencers, social media, television production

1 This chapter is based on two interviews with Mai Magdy conducted by Linda Herrera on 16 and 20 January 2022 via Zoom. Thanks to Nelly El Zayat for making the introductions.

1. Launching a Television Channel During a Pandemic

LH Can you introduce yourself and your role you at Madrasatna?

MM² I manage two channels, Madrasatna 1 for Grades 4-6 of the primary stage, and Madrasatna 2 for middle school (Grades 7-9). I manage the content and the operation.

LH What former experience did you have in production?

MM I was at CBC (Capital Broadcasting Center), one of the leading channels in Egypt. It launched in 2011 with huge names, presenters, and budgets. I worked as a producer from the time of the launch. After two years, I became a Senior Producer, then the Director of Operations for about five years.

We had one entertainment channel and one news channel. Most of it was current affairs. And, of course, we had huge entertainment programs in formats like X Factor and things like that. That job was in Dubai. I wanted to work at home in Egypt, so I came to work on Madrasatna.

LH Was your work at CBC similar to your current work at Madrasatna?

MM The only common thing with operations is the idea of the factory. We had to plan for eight to thirteen hours of content a day. We had to think about a huge amount of content hours.

LH The channel Madrasatna 1 was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic. What was it like starting such a big project during a pandemic?

MM In the beginning in 2020, there was an urgent need to get some classes online or on TV since the schools were closed and the kids were at home. Our team of four created the whole channel from scratch. There was nothing—no studios, buildings, editing rooms, control rooms, nothing. Everything was created in three or four weeks. It was a huge challenge. It was the first time to create a channel to replace real school, maybe in the whole Middle East. We did not have a visual reference

2 Mai Magdy is the General Manager for the Channels Madrasatna 1 and Madrasatna 2. For more information on her professional experience, see <https://www.linkedin.com/in/magdymai/>.

worldwide for how to do the classes. Nobody in satellite television does schools. This never happened before, and it was hard to get there.

LH Did the channel start as a temporary project to fill a need during the school closures during COVID-19?

MM I only received a one-year plan in the beginning, so I assumed it was a temporary project. At the time it was just one channel, Madrasatna 1, which covered Grades 4-9. So, the first challenge was to get this channel up and running in just one month in time for the academic year which started on 16 October 2020. That was extremely hectic. Production studios are always busy and there were many cases of COVID-19. These were weird and strange times, and sometimes really frightening. For example, we found a good teacher to cover the subject of math for Grade 5. Then she tested positive for COVID. I could not cancel the shooting for one day, and I definitely could not wait for fifteen days for her to recover. So, we had to move fast to find an alternative because we were always recording. And we did it.

LH What were the main challenges of trying to bring educational lessons to television?

MM In the beginning it was a challenge to visualize books and make a class as TV material, especially the graphics. Normally, this is something you should work on in production for at least two months. The time was extremely tight. We began with thirty-five hours a week of content, roughly eight hours a day, which was huge. We were doing something new, something we had never done before. And we were working these long hours during a pandemic. We tried to shadow the number of the classes kids take at school and cover the full curriculum. For example, if children get ten classes of Arabic each week, we do the ten classes with a twenty-five-minute lesson, a copy of the real school.

LH How did you decide on how to present school lessons for television?

MM You always have to prove your proof of concept. We did many rehearsals and zero episodes, episodes that are never aired. These are just trials until we get there, till you feel it is right and understandable for everyone. For example, I started with finding English teachers with

good accents. Just good accents, not American or British. I found out that any fluent speaker on TV will probably get negative feedback.

LH Why would Egyptian teachers with fluent English get negative feedback?

MM The kids hate it here in Egypt when teachers have a full American accent. For example, for the Grade 4 curriculum, I started doing the science and math episodes in English with a teacher who speaks with a fluent American accent. The feedback was really bad, extremely bad. Mothers all over social media were saying, 'You are not doing this product for American kids. We are Egyptian kids. We don't understand'. It is experience, there was a learning curve last year, and we are still learning.

LH Do you regularly check social media to get feedback on your products?

MM I check it every day (laughs). Because, you know, sometimes you review your product and you see perfection, it seems great. But when you put it out there, you get a very different reaction. We must respect the opinion of the parents and kids. We are doing the product for them. They are the real client. And I always work on the feedback. Last year I got some negative feedback on social media on two teachers, so I asked if I could I change them. I got approval by the midterm break and changed them. They were good but people were complaining about their voices.

LH We are talking now in 2022 and there are three Madrasatna channels. What is the audience for the two new additional channels, Madrasatna 2 and 3?

MM Madrasatna 2 is a new channel that has been running for two months. It is dedicated to the middle school stage (Grades 6-9). The high school revisions are on Madrasatna 3. We worked on the revisions last year and produced 156 episodes, but they were aired on a different channel. We are not responsible for this channel for high school revisions anymore. Sky Production is responsible for Madrasatna 1 and 2 only.

LH What is the relationship between Sky Production and the Ministry of Education?

MM The Ministry is our client. We are a production company.

LH Do you use studios from the Ministry?

MM No, we rent studios. And we also use a small studio in Al-Ahram for the entertainment programs. It is one of the oldest studios in Egypt.³ But the Ministry is working on their own studios. They are going to be world class studios with good equipment.⁴

2. Working with Teachers for Television

LH Do you oversee the casting of teachers? What is the process?

MM Yes, and I work with some senior teachers who are consultants on this project. And of course, the Ministry oversees the final selection. Last year (2020), we did recruiting calls at a huge number of schools. We focused mainly on people from the Ministry's two main teacher training programs run by Teachers First and Discovery Education. We got recommendations from schools from those two programs. This year we also posted a recruitment call on our Facebook page. After the first cut we brought teachers and tested them, just a camera test. Someone may be the greatest teacher in the world but not TV material. Some of them just cannot perform in front of lighting and the production people. At the end of the day, we selected thirty teachers.

In the most recent casting call from 2021, we got around four hundred applicants for primary and prep (Middle School, Grades 7-9). We asked them to send us a video and teach us something in three minutes. It is much easier when you have something already to start with. The junior producers did the process of elimination until we ended with a group of forty-two teachers.

LH Were you looking for certain characteristics during casting, like younger teachers, or teachers who carry themselves in a certain way?

3 The iconic Al-Ahram studio was destroyed in a devastating fire on 16 March 2024. Al-Ahram was one of Egypt's oldest studios founded in 1944 and was 'one of the Arab world's most prestigious and oldest film production houses' (Al-Ahram 2024).

4 The idea for the studios began during the time of the Minister of Education and Technical Education Dr. Tarek Shawki (2017-2022), with his deputy minister Dr. Ahmed Daher. The studios were finally inaugurated in April 2024 under the new Minister Dr. Reda Hegazy and his Deputy Dr. Daher. 'The Educational Content Studio' is located in October 6 City on the premises of the Professional Academy for Teachers (PAT) in collaboration with the companies UNESCO and Huawei (EDUTech Talks 2024)

MM Honestly, we needed to be inclusive. We have this statement, 'Everybody's Welcome'. For example, I have nothing against teachers with the veil. And if the teacher is a bit older than the average TV material, it is fine as long as he or she is good. But mostly, we work with younger teachers. What stood out were the ones who had more creative ideas and found ways to get things extremely understandable on TV. Those were the best, and we had many of those to be honest. For example, we had geometry teachers who drew everything in an appealing way. We had many talented teachers.

LH What did you learn about teachers during the casting calls?

MM After a few casting calls it became extremely clear that we have two kinds of teachers. The first are those who are interested in their development, new methods of teaching, and learning new things. The second group are those who are just interested in two questions: how many hours are you taking from my week, and how much money are you paying me? This second type is hard to work with, to be honest. This kind of teacher is just mainly talking about money. It is important to be paid. It is their time. We cannot pay much of course, but it is reasonable. This year we have much more experience and are better at making the selections.

LH I wonder if teachers who present on your programs become in demand for private lessons?

MM From my experience no, they do not get more private lessons. What I have seen is that they are getting more followers on social media. But they are not getting any richer.

LH Can you cast teachers who do not live in Cairo, who live in other governorates?

MM We always send cars to the ones who live one hour and a half, or two hours away because this is the only thing that guarantees that you will get your presenter on time. Some teachers live farther away, and we get them from the train station, every week. The thing about working with teachers is that they are not used to surprises. Sometimes we have

to do something in a hurry and tell them, 'We have to air now. Just come in here now'. They hate to ruin their schedule. Their schedules are holy.

LH You have worked with a lot of talent in your career. How does working with teachers compare?

MM Working with teachers is much harder than working with presenters because you must work on everything. Almost everything. We start with the looks. That is the easiest part for me because I don't do it, the stylist does it. We do not do glamorous things or anything, we just keep to the normal Egyptian teacher but help him or her to look nicer, smarter. We need to style teachers simply. We provide their wardrobe.

LH What kind of image are you aiming for with their wardrobe?

MM Neat. Just to look nice. It is never expensive clothes. I will tell you one observation (laughs). Most of the teachers wear their clothes like three sizes too large. That makes them look huge on TV. On TV, you have to be presentable. So, we get them clothes that fit them.

LH Are there certain colors or styles you prefer for teachers?

MM That depends on the studio. If you have a lot of colors in the background, they have to wear plain colors. We just make sure they do not wear clothes with many squares and stripes because they blur.

LH What is the nature of media training that you provide for teachers?

MM We tend to work with the voice and the phonetics because speaking in a studio is so different from speaking in the classroom. Teachers tend to talk in an extremely loud voice. The first time is always a disaster, and the first episode has lots of cuts. You also need to work with them in a special way, very different from presenters. You have to make teachers feel at home and be nicer than even their mothers. You need to make them feel safe, help them try other voices and poses. For example, when sitting at a desk it is always nice for a teacher to lean on his or her elbow. So, we train them on how to sit, how to look, and how to read from the monitor. When someone is in front of a camera in a studio, they get there eventually. Once they get used to everything, we deal with their psychology in the same way we would with a presenter.

3. Bringing the New Education 2.0 Curriculum to the Screen

LH When Madrasatna started in 2020, you were working with the '1.0' books from the old system. This year the new books for Grade 4 have come out. Have you seen a difference in quality and content of the old books versus the new ones?

MM As a TV producer, the first thing I can say is that the books look great. They are appealing, and the designs are great. They are TV material. You can just use the photos from the book to fill the full screen. All we have to do is show it off (see Fig. 22.1).



Fig. 22.1 Still from Grade 8 Social Studies Lesson, Madrasatna YouTube channel, 7 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNmRkcggh8ac>

MM The children use worksheets from the books. We print these materials in the studio. We also have kids in the studio for some episodes of Math, Science, Careers, and Social Studies. We do this to make everything just like the class. Everything in the studio is trying to mirror the new books and the new curriculum. We do not use a lot of screens or graphics; we use the books. And when in 2021 we were casting for Education 2.0, we met more talented teachers. It was an extremely interesting year. This term, from October 2021 to January

2022, we produced 346 hours for Grade 4 alone. This is a huge number of hours for one term only. I guess next year we will be working on just Grade 5 and repeating the Grade 4 material.

LH Aside from the quality of the books and images, have you observed other differences between the old 1.0 system and the new one?

MM Yes, everything has changed. The 2.0 system is extremely different. I always wondered when our education system in Egypt would change, and it is real now. I think it is a real leap, it is amazing. And I think they did a great job with the languages too, especially Arabic, I love the Arabic. It is smart and clever. From my perspective, this is the most important thing happening in Egypt right now, the 2.0 system. This is the main investment, the real investment. I will tell you something. My friend has three kids who are all learning in Egyptian national schools. She was saying that her youngest who is in Grade 4 (taking the new system) is the only one learning anything in school. I think this is the most powerful thing I have heard. And now the whole curriculum for Grade 4 is out there on YouTube accessible to everyone (see Fig. 22.2).⁵

LH Who oversees and writes the scripts for each lesson?

MM Discovery Education works with us in the studio on their books, and National Geographic works on their books. They write real scripts, not just bullet points. It is important at this stage for the creators of the curriculum to work on the scripts. We have had many trials. For example, Discovery wanted to use less technology to be more like a real class. They had an opinion, and we had an opinion. We both compromised until we got the perfect episode. We worked a lot and had many rehearsals. We spent maybe one week on rehearsals.

LH Does somebody from the Ministry sign off on final episodes?

MM Not really. Every subject is a little bit different. We proofread for the language episodes, and our revision teams check the work of the content creators. For example, we hired someone just to revise Grade 4

⁵ See the Madraseta YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/@madraseta/v/featured>. As of September 2025, the channel had 661K subscribers, 8,540 videos, and over 53 million views. See also Madraseta 1 and 2 on Facebook.

Social Studies because when you go through the graphics, you always need to check them twice. We have producers, post-producers, and teachers in the revision team to check course content. This happens automatically. We have a whole department for quality control for the visuals and everything.

LH Are any of your programs specifically targeted to the teachers?

MM The new curriculum is new for the teachers, not just the students. This year (2021/2022) we have a program called, 'The Teacher's Guide'. It is ten minutes a week for each subject. We use the Teacher's Guide as a way to tell them, 'This is your Bible'. If you are a teacher, just watch this. Actually, the Ministry wants us to work on the Teacher's Guides for Grades 1, 2, and 3, so that is coming up in the future.



Fig. 22.2 Still from Grade 5 math lesson, Madrasatna YouTube channel, 16 December 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lclo4_namQk

4. Entertaining Education

LH Apart from covering class lessons and some tutorials for teachers, do the Madrasatna channels develop other types of children's programming?

MM Yes, we have the freedom to work on entertaining programs not connected to the curriculum, though most of them are educational. Right now, we have two entertainment hours every day. The other

programs are aired mainly in the summer break. We come up with the shows ourselves.

LH What shows are you currently working on?

MM We started last year with short programs. We have a food program with short recipes for kids. We have a science program called 'The Lab' where we do all the science experiments from the curriculum from Grades 4-9 in the lab. I found a very nice guy with a huge social media following who just does science. We started meeting and came up with the program. We also came up with another program, 'The Lab Challenge'. It is like a game show, but it is a science game show. For example, the theme today is liquid nitrogen. We have three experiments and a contest, all with the same theme. We had one about coins, magnets, Tesla, it was very interesting. We are working on Season Two with a TV presenter who is one of the important science influencers in Egypt. We want to bring the social media personalities kids are following to television. It is a different product. A show called 'What if' explores two ideas in the same episode. We provide something that could never happen on social media, because we have our different elements like graphics and production. We also did fifty episodes of origami. 'Do it Right' is an animation program about safety with two kids, one of them doing things in an unsafe or wrong way, and then the right way. There are things like tips about sleeping, your health, things that make you more focused when you have a test. It is a short animation program. We are also working on a very nice animation series about Arabic grammar. We have the famous Arabic philosopher Sibawayh as a character in the program.⁶ In each episode we are lost in some maze, and we get out through learning a new grammar lesson. It is called, 'The Letters Word'. We have this program called 'Under 16'. The presenter chooses one subject to discover with like five, six kids. We just listen to the kids for the whole episodes. 'A Family Discussion' is a real debate between children and parents. They choose something to talk about, and the presenter

6 As stated in Encyclopaedia Britannica, Sibawayh (born around 760 in al-Bayḍa Iran and died roughly 793 in Shiraz) was 'a celebrated grammarian of the Arabic language. [...] His monumental work is *al-Kitāb fī an-naḥw* ("The Book on Grammar") or, more simply, *al-Kitāb* ("The Book"). The work was frequently used by later scholars' (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sibawayh>).

is like the judge. At the end of the episode, they sign a treaty which is a sort of a resolution. 'Celebrities' is a short three-minute program about historical figures who encountered huge challenges. It shows how they passed through hardships and what we can learn from that. The biggest project it called 'Ta`alum' or 'Learn'. It is a huge umbrella that we are doing over seasons. Last year we did four levels of five languages, English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German. We got great feedback on this. It was the biggest feedback since we opened, because it was really useful. It is free and you can just learn the language you want, the time you want. Now we are working on the new season.

We are planning to do two programs about coding. For this show I met a kid who was promoting coding through his Facebook page. We met in person to plan the show. I hired just one producer for it. We are still in the pre-production phase and plan to make sixty episodes in two months. We are also working on a program to learn how to play Chess. 'Izzay' or 'How' is a huge program with life coaches and psychiatrists who work on topics related to children. We produced 168 episodes so far. We tackled everything from autism, hyperactivity, managing your time, and how to learn respect, to how to teach children to manage money. Each topic takes two to three episodes. We have a special life coach or psychiatrist for each program. It is a daily program. It is like a life coach giving a course to parents. The fitness program for kids has two kids with a gym instructor, teaching kids to do sports at home, things that the mother and children may do together, things like that. This is on air right now.

LH That is a lot of programming!

MM It is a factory, you know. But I really like working on ideas from scratch until the show gets there. I like the process because it includes kids, and they have really been teaching us.

LH Do you need the Ministry of Education to approve the children's shows? Do they play a role in promoting this content?

MM Up to this point, the Ministry helped just by sharing the grids on their pages, which are much, much bigger than ours. But I think we should go for more. I get the approval from the Ministry through our

CEO about the concept and the presenter. We always get the approval before the production, of course. And to be honest, working with the Ministry has been surprisingly pleasant. We used to do stuff with the government in a hard way, but I think things are changing.

5. Viewership and Circulation

LH Do you have information about the viewership since the launch of the channel?

MM Unfortunately, we do not have statistics about TV channels anymore in Egypt. This stopped seven or eight years ago. We have two kinds of channels in Egypt. We have those in the satellite, and we have the other channels that are aired on short waves all over Egypt. The Madrasatna channel is aired on a kind of transmission which is like a radio. You can receive it everywhere. You can never get data on this kind of use. But for social media, the numbers are growing. I found thirty-six Facebook pages that circulate our TV material. And there are many channels on Telegram. We also have constant viewership from many Arab countries, mainly Saudi Arabia, the UAE (United Arab Emirates), and Kuwait. And we always get viewership from Italy. I don't know why. I think it is from the Egyptian kids who live there. This year is extremely different compared to last year. For instance, we have this daily social show, a talk show where our reporters go to the streets. Last year people would ask, 'What is Madrasatna? What do you do?' This year, everyone knows about the channel and the pages are doubling on YouTube. We did not campaign much. Last year the primary pages were like, 200,000 likes. Now it is about half a million. And it is an organic growth. I started to get calls from teachers every day with ideas for programs.

LH When did you see that bump in user activity?

MM When we started doing the revisions for high school with Madrasatna 3. The channel also got better known with the entertainment programs during the summer break. That is when people really hooked up with the channel. I started to see a lot of feedback on social media from people I did not even know.

6. Madrasatna 3 for Thanaweya Amma Revisions

LH Madrasatna 3 was launched in the spring term for high school students preparing for the Thanaweya Amma exam. Does that channel operate according to the same model as Madrasatna 1 and 2?

MM Thanaweya Amma Revisions are a project involving three companies: Sky, which is responsible for studios, postproduction, planning, and revisions; Al Mentor, responsible for providing content; and Madrasatna 3, responsible for airing. At first, we were responsible for producing 156 episodes, but we did not air them. The airing was done by al-Ahly channel which owns the Madrasatna 3 channel. As a producer I just had to plan it. We had subject supervisors, freelancers which we picked from all types of schools, the international schools and national schools, and schools from a range of governorates as well as Giza and Cairo. When we were beginning the project, I had to be there. I was always in the preproduction.

For the high school level, we had like three checkpoints. Each episode was revised. One by our consultants, then by the company Al-Mentor who were the co-producers in the project, and the revision team of Madrasatna 3 which aired the project. We also worked with the CCIMD (Center for Curriculum and Instructional Materials Development) and of course we had some instructions from Dr. Nawal Shalaby (Director of CCIMD). We had a huge community of teachers. We had two kinds of revisions. General revisions regarding the whole subject with its ten episodes, and additional revisions right before the exams requested by the CCIMD team. They asked for three episodes for Math for Geometry, Arabic grammar, things like that. Because the timing was so tight, it was hard in the postproduction because of the revision loop. Each time there was a tiny problem, maybe in one letter in a strap or something, we had to go back to the episode, open it, then render and go through the whole process again. The timing was extremely tight. We had many, many changes and were always late. We had to finish all the episodes fifteen days before the examination started, which gave us only a few weeks in total. It was very hard, this project.

LH Were you able to hire a big team to work on this?

MM Not a big team. We hired a team of five or six people through the Ministry for one month for shooting and postproduction. We hired them through the company al-Muasir. They helped with that.

LH *For casting secondary school teachers, was the process similar to what you were doing in Madrasatna 1 and 2?*

MM Casting for high school is a bit different. You are not just casting but testing the teacher through the whole process. Since they are not reading a script, you have to see what ideas each teacher will provide for the episode. How will he or she explain the material visually? Also, the commitment is very important because we started recording in April (2021). That was extremely tight. For the secondary teachers we did not recruit through social media, but through word of mouth. We had the same process with asking them to send a three-minute tape. You know, here in Egypt there are a few very famous teachers. In the beginning we cast them but did not end up working with them. This experience proved that the famous ones are not the best. The main issue was that they were not ready to compromise on their content. They saw it as holy. In terms of working on their episodes and material, they were not willing to spend like two more hours to get the best product. The stars are not into that, I mean, they have bulky schedules. When you are taking two or three hours from them you are taking like 15,000 pounds (in private lesson fees). And I cannot pay that. So, even though we started with famous teachers, at the end of the day we stuck with the teachers who were willing to work with the different publishing companies that were providing the content. The content for high school was critical, everything was critical.

LH *It seems like you are constantly under time pressures.*

MM Yes, but it is less stressful than producing news programs, which is what I used to do. I am a happier person now.

7. The Future of Children's Television in Egypt

LH *How do you see the future of educational television and children's programming in Egypt?*

MM We do not have content in Arabic for kids, nothing at all in Egyptian Arabic. We do not understand other accents. So, providing something like the kids' channels from Al Jazeera and MBC Saudi Arabia, things like that, this will never work in Egypt because they are not in Egyptian accents. We also need stories that are not so American, things our kids can relate to. So, there is a huge demand for entertainment for kids, useful entertainment. It is not just about the education and the training of the teachers. There is also a huge need for entertaining the kids. But there is nothing on TV, and the huge entertainment networks in Egypt never invest one penny in children's productions.

LH *You would think there would be more investment and interest with all the children in Egypt.*

MM I mean, it is very weird. I worked many years in entertainment channels, and they always say there are no advertisers for kids' entertainment. I do not get that, really. Madraseta has the potential to be the children's network.

LH *How do you feel about your career shift to children's and educational programming?*

MM Doing entertaining education is the most interesting project I have ever done. I am learning new things about education, about the child, about educating people. It is the first time that I feel that there is always a message, a real message. I am quite sure that the kids who stay home and learn their curriculum from Madraseta will be just fine. I like the product, I am proud of it, it is very different. I never have guilt trips, like you have when you're working on TV (laughs). I like this project a lot.

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