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The outbreak of H1N1 **panic** in Egypt

**HOW BAD SCIENCE COMMUNICATION
AFFECTS AN ENTIRE NATION**



THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Egypt is famous for its ancient civilization and some of the world's most renowned monuments that are evidence of a highly advanced and prosperous nation.



THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Egypt's current reality is that of a struggling developing country suffering massive socioeconomic problems caused by decades of bad policies and a snowballing overpopulation.



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In July 2009, Egypt's population was estimated at **78,866,635**

Egypt's current population growth rate is **2.033%**



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Living standards in Egypt are low by international standards, and have declined consistently since 1990.



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According to United Nations figures, **20-30% of the population lives below the poverty line; i.e. up to 24 million people.**



THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

A lack of adequate resources for **schools** and **hospitals** has caused these services to decline in quality over the years.

Health expenditures: 6.3% of GDP

Education expenditures: 4.2% of GDP



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Literacy in Egypt: 71.4% (male: 83% - female: 59.4%)

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- ✖ All levels of education are free in governmental schools.

However, according to the World Bank, there are great differences in educational attainment of the rich and the poor, also known as the “wealth gap.”



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- ✕ About 30% of all Egyptians in the relevant age group go to university. However, only half of them graduate.



According to *The Economist*, standards of education at Egyptian public universities are “dreadful”.

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✖ The Level of Learning in Egypt is very low:

- Large numbers of students per class:
 - At least 70 per class in governmental schools due to shortage in capacity and facilities.
 - A range from 30 to 60 per class in private schools because these schools rely on tuitions so for administration, the more the better!
 - 300-500 students per theoretical lectures, 50-100 students per practical sessions in State Universities due to shortage in capacity and facilities.
- Underpaid teachers.
- Huge academic curricula.
- **Emphasis on passing exams rather than learning.**



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Bottom Line is: the majority of Egyptians rely primarily on the Media for information.

The press

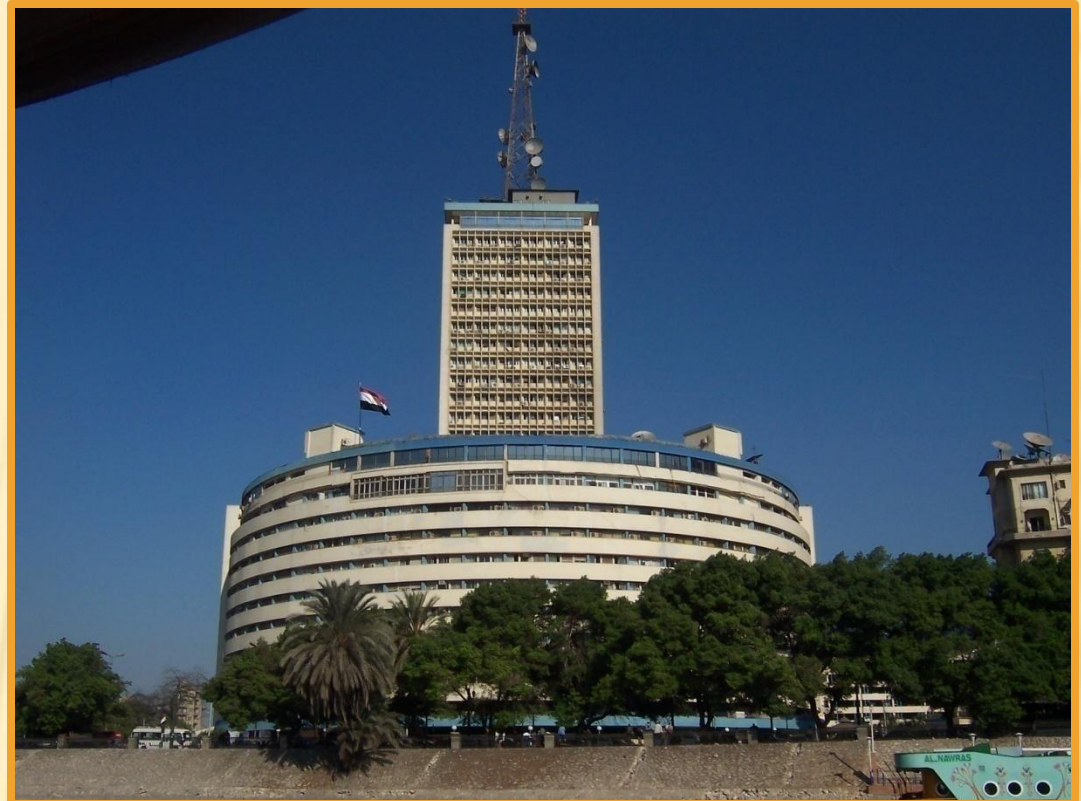
- The written press is very diverse in Egypt, with over 500 newspapers, journals and magazines available.
- In the past, the majority of publications were owned mostly or in some way by the government, the opposition or other political parties. Now, the number of independent publications has soared.
- The sharp rise in the number of private and independent titles means the "red lines" observed by press sources have largely disappeared.



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Radio

- Nearly two-thirds of Egyptians listen to the radio on daily basis, with news and religious programs popular on state radio.
- Listening figures have dropped dramatically owing to the spread of television in general and the wide availability of satellite television in particular.
- New private stations broadcasting on FM appeal strongly to young audiences, offering up-to-date music and discussions on topics of interest, but no news or information.



THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Television

- Television remains the most popular medium in Egypt and audience numbers are increasing rapidly.
- There is a mix of state broadcasters and increasing private broadcasters.
- The Ministry of Information controls content in the state-owned broadcast media.
- ✗ Popular private TV channels offer entertainment programs to 16- to 26-year-olds; they attract older viewers by live talk shows airing social and political, often controversial, issues now also increasingly allowed by state-run TV.
- ✗ This has subsequently produced changes in the Egyptian media landscape.
- ✗ Talk shows have managed to grab the attention of the average Egyptian citizen, who is not interested in the independent press despite its recent success.

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In Short:

- ✖ The majority of the Egyptian public believe and act on what they read in the newspapers and more importantly what they hear on the street, radio and especially TV, particularly popular Talk Shows.
- ✖ What happened in the case of H1N1 was a publicized war between state and private media outlets.
 - The war was caused by medias that thrived on attacking the government, which brought them more readers and viewers.
 - The war continued for months due to the government's highly publicized bad reaction to the media's claims, which led to an increasing confusion and conflict among the Egyptian public.

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

- ✘ Ever since the WHO announced H1N1 as Pandemic Influenza, Egyptian headlines in both state and private newspapers flared with warnings of this coming plague!
 - There was no scientific content about the nature of the disease, how it infects people, its symptoms, how to deal with it...
 - All the headlines and news articles were about how far the disease has spread, how many cases, especially deaths, how we need to take extensive precautionary measures and avoid crowds at all costs, which is impossible in Egypt unless you stay home!
- ✘ TV talk shows launched a campaign against the government, urging it to take more action; demanding postponing or closing schools altogether for the year 2009/2010 in fear of the disease, especially with the usual overcrowding of classrooms and lack of effective hygienic measures.

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT



H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

- ✘ Even the Egyptian government was affected by the media so instead of taking measures to explain the situation and calm the public, a series of bad decisions and media propaganda reinforced the public's fear.
 - Schools were in fact postponed.
 - Students were allowed to miss school freely.
 - Religious holidays were extended.
 - The Minister of Education made a series of publicized visits to schools and was vaccinated on national television.
- ✘ The media's response was to call for further action and exposing the farce of the visits by showing other schools where no measures were being taken at all!

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT



H1N1 PANIC CAUSED CHAOS IN EGYPTIAN SCHOOLS

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Ala'shera Masa'an (10 PM) on the Spread of H1N1 rumors on the Egyptian Street:

- ✕ *People are so afraid they would abandon public transportation if someone sneezed.*
- ✕ *People would not go to a certain city, district, street, club, restaurant or shop in a city based on rumors of H1N1 cases found there!*
- ✕ *There are also rumors that it is spread in hospitals so they are afraid to go there if they need treatment.*

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Ala'shera Masa'an (10 PM) on Egyptian schools in the shadow of H1N1:

- ✕ *The start of the school year 2009/2010 is overshadowed with fear of H1N1; “this is not a normal school year”, says the Minister of Education.*

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Ala'shera Masa'an (10 PM) on Egyptian schools in the shadow of H1N1:

- ✕ *The decision to postpone the start of the school year a few weeks to allow time for precautionary measures was met with disapproval; people were still afraid of putting their children in risk.*
- ✕ *The public demanded postponing until the flu season was over, which would mean postponing it till summer! Or until the arrival of the vaccine.*

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Ala'shera Masa'an (10 PM) on Egyptian schools in the shadow of H1N1:

- ✕ *The Minister reassures that enough measures were taken to secure safety from the spread of the disease and for handling any cases when appearing.*
- ✕ *The Minister made several visits to governmental schools to check on the precautionary measures and was confident that the massive awareness campaigns had served to inform the public enough.*
- ✕ *However, the minister could not possibly visit every school in Egypt!*

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

Chaos on the First Day of School:

- ✕ *Both students and parents were scared.*
- ✕ *Many refused to take their children to school.*
- ✕ *Many of the Parents who did waited for their children outside the schools*

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

AlQahera wa Alnas (Cairo & the People) warnings reek havoc:

The Show presenter says:

- ✕ “we no longer hear about H1N1 cases but **deaths!**”
- ✕ “hospitals and labs are refusing to check or test unless symptoms have persisted for more than three days, **which would be too late as the disease would have reached the respiratory system leading to death**”, “I am sure that this is what caused all deaths so far.”
- ✕ “**a doctor told me that the disease is getting more dangerous rapidly.**”
- ✕ “**what we are facing is a BIOLOGICAL BOMB**”

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

AlQahera wa Alnas (Cairo & the People) warnings reek havoc:

On the phone:

- ✕ “I call for taking the decision of suspending schools because otherwise we would be playing with fire”, “we are putting our children and elderly at risk.”
- ✕ “this crisis is too big for our capacity and we will not be able to fight it.”

THE OUTBREAK OF H1N1 PANIC IN EGYPT

- ✘ The H1N1 scenario is not the only case where bad media and lack of effective science communication of health issues has caused panic and uncalled for chaos in Egypt.
- ✘ The consequences are always dire on an already suffering nation; in the case of H1N1, the already suffering Education System has suffered even further, eventually affecting upcoming generations who are growing in uncertain times of controversial and contradictory medias.
- ✘ Both state and private medias have a responsibility in the chaos caused by bad science communication.

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CONCLUSION

- ✖ **Egyptian Education strategies need to change now;** more money, research and reinforcement are required.
Unfortunately, when this actually happens, the effect will be detected on the long term.
- ✖ **Informal Science Communication is not a luxury anymore;** it is a necessity to fight illiteracy and ignorance on the short term.
Both Public and Private Sectors need to invest in Informal Science Communication; not just science centers, but more importantly by outreach and media.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✖ **Science Communication needs to be present on TV, radio, the internet and in the press.**
- ✖ **Other than material resources, human resources need to be trained on communicating as well as promoting science effectively through these medias.**
- ✖ **Approaching, informing and educating the public through innovative methods using these medias, will empower them and strengthen their confidence by opening their eyes to the scientific method in thinking, evaluating and reacting to all issues, especially Health.**

Egypt is in fact rich with potential and resources. Nevertheless, for this potential and these resources to surface, we must start digging NOW. Science Communication is the shovel!

THANK YOU

