

SCRIPT: “Communication in Egypt: a Journey of Letters and Beyond”

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December, 2015

From telegrams to cellphones, the communication means have strongly evolved in the past decade, paving the way for the Internet to burst and enable individuals to send and receive texts within minutes. Keeping it all in the family, this documentary reveals the diaries of those who witnessed this evolution in Egypt from the early 1940s till the 21st century.

SFX: FADE IN: Telegraph machine (:04)

I bet you don't recognize the sound of this machine. That's okay because neither did

I! That was the sound of a telegraph machine producing a telegram.

SFX: FADE OUT: Telegraph machine (:04)

SFX: FADE IN: Writing on paper (:03)

But you might know that sound. Got that right, that was someone writing a letter.

SFX: FADE OUT: Writing on paper (:03)

SFX: FADE IN: Telephone ringing (:03)

Now you can definitely tell the sound of this one. You know it, the phone!

SFX: FADE OUT: Telephone ringing (:03)

MUSIC: FADE IN: “I don't want to miss out” by Aerosmith (0:00 – 0:15)

Now you might be wondering why you listened to all these sounds, well, they represented three means of communication used by three generations in Egypt in the past century. In a world with no cell phones, no laptops and no Internet, what do you think that was like?

MUSIC: FADE OUT: "I don't want to miss out" by Aerosmith (0:00 – 0:15)

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Alf Leila w Leila" by Um Kalthoum (0:00 – 01:26)

HUSSEIN SHERINE (HS): "The only way of getting in touch was by sending a telegram." (:04)

That was my great uncle, Hussein Sherine, 94 years old, who grew up in Egypt in 1940s. The telegraph and telephone authority had been established by the Egyptian government.

HS: "In 1944, I passed this superior diploma." (:05)

And as the committee coming from Paris to give the examination was staying in Alexandria, he had to take the exam there.

HS: "So the only way to get in touch with my parents, to let them know that I succeeded and got the diploma was by sending a telegram." (:14)

So basically he couldn't even make a phone call from Alexandria to Cairo to inform his parents that he passed the exam but apparently, the telegram wasn't really practical.

HASSAN RAGAB (HR): "It was a big hassle. You had to, you would have to go to the telegraph office first, and then make sure that the, the operator doesn't misspell the, the, the telegraph which was quite a frequent mistake." (0:12)

MUSIC: FADE OUT: "Alf Leila w Leila" by Um Kalthoum (0:00 – 01:26)

SFX: FADE IN: Old phone dial when narrator says "could" (:07)

That was my father, Hassan Ragab who grew up in the 60s. It came to me as a surprise to know that telegrams were written in Arabic and English. However, the telephone was evolving and Egyptians could make a phone call locally.

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Ahwak" by Abdel Halim Hafez (0:00 – 0:43)

SFX: FADE IN: Dialing tone when Hassan says "dialing" (:03)

HR: "The only thing that was available was the telephone. And it was, in Egypt it was terrible, the telephone service was very bad, you can, you would have to wait for long periods of time to get a dialing tone and even if you get a dialing tone, it's not guaranteed that you can get a connection." (:15)

SFX: FADE OUT: Old phone dial when Hassan says "only" (:07)

SFX: FADE OUT: Dialing tone (:03)

That's not all. Sometimes, they weren't able to call someone from outside the district.

HR: "Sometimes you could get a dialing tone that is different from the normal dialing tone. This one would be for the local area only. So if you are in Heliopolis, you could call someone from Heliopolis only, you cannot call someone outside of Heliopolis. This was the local tone that you could identify it."

MUSIC: FADE OUT: "Ahwak" by Abdel Halim Hafez (0:00 – 0:43)

It looks like the situation was already difficult enough when it came to the use of the telephone locally in Egypt, something we definitely don't face today. Guess how they used to communicate with the outside world then. Here is my grandmother, Hoda AbouRehab, 72 years old.

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Enta Omri" by Um Kalthoum (00:00 – 00:45)

SFX: FADE IN: Opening of letter (:04)

(HA): "Dear Mr. Azmi, greetings in our lord's name. I hope that all is well with you and your entire family. How is life in Egypt? I hope it is all fine. Well, captain, I really have not been able to write since you left Nigeria." (:20)

SFX: FADE OUT: Opening of envelope letter (:04)

She was reading me a letter sent to my late grandfather, Egyptian navy diver and Marine Captain. But were the letters reliable?

HA: "In the world, all over the world, but not in Egypt (laughs) but, sometimes it would take a month for you to receive a letter." (:07)

MUSIC: FADE OUT: "Enta Omri" by Um Kalthoum (00:00 – 00:45)

SFX: FADE IN: Military March (:08)

MUSIC: FADE IN: Egypt National Anthem (00:00 – 00:19)

In 1952, a group of nationalist officers in Egypt's military commonly known as the Free Officers Movement, led to the outbreak of the Egyptian Revolution marking the end of King Faruq's constitutional monarchy and establishing a republic.

SFX: FADE OUT: Military March (:08)

It was a political transition and Gamal Abdel Nasser had just been appointed President of Egypt.

MUSIC: FADE OUT: Egypt National Anthem (00:00 – 00:19)

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Aghadan Alkak" by Um Kalthoum (00:00 – 02:22)

HA: "And during Abdel Nasser's time, whenever we got a letter from abroad, it was opened." (:05)

HR: "And sealed, with a seal saying that it was opened, by the, the guy who was official assigned to open them. They were looking for spies mainly." (:10)

In the late 60s however, Egyptians were able to make an international call, called a.

HA: "Trunk call" (:01)

Also referred to as "trunking" which meant at that time a long distance call instead of a local one.

HA: "During Abdel Nasser's time, they were recording everything we said. So I remember once, I asked, I wanted to speak to my aunt who was living in

Italy.” (:10)

A phone call that costed 1 Egyptian pound per minute, which they found to be very expensive at that time.

HA: “And they gave me the line at 3:00 sharp like they said they would, but then I couldn’t hear anything and I kept asking the telephone operator ‘I can’t hear anything’ so apparently she was new at her job, she didn’t know she wasn’t supposed to tell me so she told me ‘yes, ma’am it’s just that the recording is not working and I can’t record what you’re saying’.” (:21)

Oups.

HA: “And naturally we weren’t supposed to know that they were recording. So she told me ‘it will take a few minutes and I’ll call you back. Later on when I worked at Citibank, we had the telexes, that was the most reliable thing to send abroad.” (:15)

I’m sorry but I don’t know what a telex is can you tell me?

HA: “It’s like, you mean you really don’t know? You’ve never seen a telex machine?” (:04)

No, why would I?

SFX: FADE IN: Telex sound when Hoda says “only” (:05)

HA: “Well, it’s like, it’s like a computer, I mean it has a typing, a keyboard, only it makes a lot of noise only you can have it in your own place so we had one in the office. Whenever we wanted to speak to someone, let’s say in Europe or in wherever, we would go down to the telex room because it was a huge machine and we would type whatever we wanted to type and they would receive it at the other end.” (:28)

SFX: FADE OUT: Telex sound (:05)

MUSIC: FADE OUT: “Aghadan Alkak” by Um Kalthoum (00:00 – 02:22)

Now let’s see what my mother, Nadine Azmi, 46 years old, has to say about the

means of communication she used.

MUSIC: FADE IN: "La Vie en Rose" by Edith Piaf (00:00 – 00:59)

NADINE AZMI (NA): "We would use letters all the time, at this point of time I was engaged to my husband now." (:07)

My father that is.

NA: "And he was working in the UK and the only way to communicate quite nicely, with long conversations, was through letters." (:13)

International calls were growing more popular as well.

NA: "My late father, he only gave me permission to call my fiancé only once a week, it was every Sunday, and I would only have to talk for a very short time, so and then whenever I would cheat, and try to call again without him knowing, he would know from the invoice and he would make me pay the extra call." (:27)

MUSIC: FADE OUT: "La Vie en Rose" by Edith Piaf (00:00 – 00:59)

MUSIC: FADE IN: "Shamandoura" by Mohamed Mounir (00:00 – 00:57)

Wow, time has definitely changed and so did the means of communication. I don't think our parents ever let us talk on a phone for a certain period of time now. Telegrams, letters and trunk calls are almost vanished now. We've come a long way since then and technology has certainly impacted the way we communicate now.

This audio documentary was produced by Karima Ragab for the Audio Production course at the American University in Cairo taught by Professor Kim Fox in Fall 2015. Special thanks to my great uncle Hussein Sherine, my grandmother Hoda Abourehab, my father Hassan Ragab and my mother Nadine Azmi for their interviews. The songs used in this documentary are "I Don't Want to Miss Out" by Aerosmith, "Alf Leila w

Leila” by Oum Kalthoum, “Ahwak” by Abdel Halim Hafez, Egypt’s National Anthem, “Aghadan Alkak” by Oum Kalthoum, “La Vie en Rose” by Edith Piaf and “Shamandoura” by Mohamed Mounir. Sound effects from Prosoundeffectslibrary.com.

MSUIC: FADE OUT: “Shamandoura” by Mohamed Mounir (00:00 – 00:57)