

LOCAL BROADCASTING IN UPPER EGYPT

by

Kenneth W. Cline

Wanted: Local area persons able to sing, play musical instruments, recite poetry or read the Koran, for public performance of their skills. Apply at North Upper Egypt Broadcasting, El Minya.

The above announcement is made-up. But it is based on an actual talent hunt being conducted by an Egyptian radio station. The "Original Amateur Hour" may have disappeared from American television, but it is alive and well on Egyptian radio.

"Here I always announce we want to hear from anyone who can play anything musical, any musical machine, who can sing, write, read the Koran, who has any facility," said Mustapha Ahmed Eid, the 42-year-old manager of North Upper Egypt Broadcasting. "I have had a reaction, especially from Koran readers and poets."

On May 13, Mr. Eid's station, based in El Minya and covering a 240-kilometer stretch of the Nile Valley from El Faiyum to Asyut, became the fourth in the country to offer locally-generated news, sports, weather and entertainment. The other local broadcast stations cover Alexandria (since 1954), Cairo (1981), and the Delta (1982).

Before the station went on the air, Mr. Eid's staff conducted some man-in-the-street interviews to survey listener musical preferences.

"I found there are 10 percent who want to hear Um Kalsoum or Abdel Halim Hafaz (famous Egyptian singers, both now deceased), but 90 percent wanted to hear local songs," said Mr. Eid.

Despite the demand, he has been able to turn up only a few musically-inclined people in the district. "I think there are many persons who sing local songs, but we haven't had time to research and discover them," he said.

Nevertheless, the station opens and closes to the tune of "The 12 O'Clock Train to Upper Egypt," a local favorite.

The station is located on the northern outskirts of El Minya, just off the main Nile Valley road and next to the city's new university. Its somewhat less than state-of-the-art recording and transmitting equipment is housed in a squarish modern building with the appropriate tangle of aerials and dishes

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Mustapha Ahmed Eid, manager of North Upper Egypt Broadcasting in El Minya.

up top.

But to get to the walled compound from the main road, one's car has to squeeze past the chickens, sheep and children inhabiting the dusty narrow lane of an intervening small village.

Perhaps it helps to remind the educated, westernized station employees, driving through in their chauffeured Peugeot station wagon, exactly where they are. Mr. Eid, himself a light-skinned, cultured gentleman looking something like an Egyptian Yves Montand, seems to have those darker-skinned, galabiyah-clad villagers in mind.

"The philosophy of local broadcasting is to serve the people, to close with them, to be very very near to them helping them in their problems," he said. "We broadcast the Nile conditions, the wind speeds on Lake Qarun in Faiyum for the fishermen there, and tell the farmers they must do so and so to protect their plans."

For the moment, this information is only available each day for an hour in the morning and two hours at night, except for Thursday and Friday which feature additional hours. Mr. Eid said he hopes to increase the station's operating time eventually.

But at least the listeners can tune in during these few hours and learn about what is going on in their areas from Mr. Eid's team of 25 reporters. Before, they would have had to get their news from the main government network, the Voice of America's popular Arabic service, the BBC or Saudi Arabian radio.

One service they will not get from Mr. Eid's station is local investigative reporting. Mr. Eid said he is careful to respect "the limits which are known to everyone who works in broadcasting or journalism."

"In the USA, there is still a line," he added, defining "the line" as "news that would do something wrong to the country on the outside."

On the other hand, Mr. Eid was emphatic about the absence of government censorship at his station. "Here, I am the manager, I have my own decisions," he said.

What would he do if his reporters uncovered some information about governmental corruption or incompetence?

Mr. Eid responded by describing a recent incident in El Minya, where an apartment complex had not been receiving water on its fourth floor.

Instead of broadcasting this news on the radio, Mr. Eid went to the head of the water department and asked him what the problem was and when it could be fixed. "I must keep an eye on the problem, not say 'this is so bad, so wrong.'" The fourth floor eventually got its water, he said.

"We help people in their lives and we do our best to help our government and president," said Mr. Eid. "Then, all of us are satisfied."

One way Mr. Eid's station helps the people is by publicizing public health information. For this task, Mr. Eid has hired a young man of remarkably diverse interests and skills.

Mohamed Hasham Fathey (known as "Hasham"), 21, a student at Asyut University, goes on the air an hour each week to promote health and science awareness in the area. One of his recent programs featured tips on controlling rat infestation, a problem in rural as well as urban Egypt.

His serious field of study at the university is physical fitness. With his musculature unusually strong and well-proportioned for an Egyptian, Hasham holds a black belt in karate and teaches the sport in El Minya, his hometown.

"Science is only a hobby, not a specialization with me," he said. Despite that, he has managed to become the supervisor of the seven science clubs in Upper Egypt.

Aside from his radio show, Hasham has used his science skills to help his people in other ways. Having recently taken a course in solar heating, he then helped construct three solar heaters for residents in El Minya. He also designed and helped build a special oven for a nearby village.

Hasham said his oven utilizes a layer of sand between the metal plates and thereby conserves almost 100 percent of its heat, compared with 60 percent in the village's old oven.

Hasham has literary interests too. He writes science and sports columns for the Voice of Minya, a monthly newspaper, and detective stories for El-Ahram, the major Cairo newspaper, and Sami, a children's magazine.

Mr. Eid is genuinely in awe of Hasham. "He is better than me; he gives more than me for his country. He has a lot of energy, denying himself always."

But Mr. Eid has a lot of energy as well, regularly working 12-hour days to get his station operating. His enthusiasm for his work is transparent. When talking about broadcasting, his happy smiles and laughter are spontaneous.



Mohamed Hasham Fathey, radio science announcer, in front of the offices of the Voice of Minya newspaper.

"My father learned me that money is not all things," said Mr. Eid. "But to find yourself and to feel you are doing something for your people will satisfy yourself."

Born in Cairo's northern district of Shoubra, the oldest of seven children, Mr. Eid became interested in public speaking while in his teens.

"When I was in secondary school, my own hobby was to speak in the school," he said. As his fellow pupils lined up in the morning, Mr. Eid would step up to a microphone and read speeches or newspaper accounts.

His father, a clerk in the building department, had prepared him well for his later career.

"To be an announcer, you must be a very good speaker in Arabic and know at least one foreign language," he said. "My father learned me English and Arabic very well. Every day when he was going to work, he gave me five or 10 words (in both languages) to study. Then he asked me about them when he returned in the afternoon."

At Cairo University, Mr. Eid studied to be an agricultural engineer and worked as one for six months in Beni Suef after he graduated. "I think agriculture is the finest thing to work in, but I didn't like to do it," he said.

Entering the army in 1965, he stayed in the service until 1974, becoming a major in the artillery. It was during this period that he began to seriously consider broadcasting.

After leaving the army, Mr. Eid passed his broadcasting examination and worked at a Cairo station as an agricultural program producer. He also studied for seven semesters at the state broadcasting institute.

His rise through the ranks was rapid. In April 1981, he became chief announcer at the Cairo local broadcasting station. On October 5 of this year, he was appointed manager of local broadcasting in north Upper Egypt.

Although he is now burdened with administrative duties, Mr. Eid likes to keep his hand in at the microphone.

"I cannot leave the microphone," he said. "I'm like a fish -- take him from water and he will die."

Each night, before the station signs off at 9 p.m., Mr. Eid's incredibly pleasing and authoritative voice, articulating each vowel and consonant with loving respect, comes over the air to bid the audience goodnight. The technicians throw in some echo chamber effects so that his words take on a celestial quality when he intones "Allahu Akbar" (God is great).

"I tell them that God sees everything you do and that you must do everything you can to help your neighbors," he said. "I want him (the listener) to ask himself what he did today and what he will do tomorrow."

Mr. Eid has been married 10 years. His wife, Fatma, does social research in the commercial college of Cairo's Ain Shams University. She will soon come to El Minya to work at the university there.

The couple have two children: a boy, Heisem, 8, and a girl, Heba, 5.