Using history to protect children from extremist ideologies: The example of *Noor Magazine* in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

In the past few years, cultural institutions in the Arab world have increased their interest in introducing history for children through different media channels, including printed magazines. One of these recent publications is *Noor Magazine*. One feature of *Noor Magazine* is its focus on the dissemination of Egyptian and Arabic and Islamic history along with its aim to protect children from extremist ideology. The present study aims to analyze the history presented in *Noor Magazine* in relation to how it may promote social welfare. The results of the present study show a rather great diversity among the included historical topics, which range from ancient Egyptian history to modern history, Arabic and Islamic history, and also world history. In regards to how this history is presented, there is a strong focus on politico-pedagogical, ideological, and moral uses of history, where children are presented with positive and character-building examples from the historical past to serve contemporary interests. A final prominent result is a focus on a traditional grand-narrative approach to the historical past where children are invited to learn about historical facts, rather than critically assess or engage with the historical narratives they are presented with and thus foster inclusive historical culture.

KEYWORDS

Popular History; Use of History; Historical Culture; Historical Media; Memory and History; Collective Memory

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Introduction

It is often claimed that history performs many functions in everyday society, including the formation of identity and the cultural identification of 'the self' and 'the other' (Carretero, 2017; Karlsson, 2009; Nordgren, 2016). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the Arabic people's growing interest in history is commonly attributed to what has been called the 'Arab Awakening' at the beginning of the 19th century, which resulted from contact with the West (Chejne, 1960). Egyptian society has recently witnessed a number of challenges stemming from the revolution in 2011, and one of the more acute ones has been the rise of religious fundamentalism and terrorism (Brown, 2017). These crises have led to a focus on ways to steer Egyptian youth away from extremist groups in society. In this context, Egypt's leading Islamic institution Al-Azhar, which is commonly described as a proponent of moderate interpretations of Islam, started publication of *Noor Magazine* which is directed at Egyptian children between ages 8 and 18. While *Noor Magazine* covers many aspects related to childhood, one prominent feature of the magazine is its focus on Egyptian and Arab history as a conduit for promoting positive views on modern Egyptian society (Barak, 2016). Hence, the historical content of *Noor Magazine* is explicitly used to foster certain values among Egyptian youth, and as such it provides an interesting source for research on the historical culture of contemporary Egypt.

Broadly speaking, research on historical culture in the Middle East has identified three dominant historical discourses in the Arab world: (i) the Islamic historical discourse that focuses on social, political, scientific, and religious aspects of Islam during history, (ii) the Ancient historical discourse that focuses on the ancient history of the Middle East, and (iii) the Arab nationalist historical discourse that attempts to reconcile the two previous historical discourses through a focus on the unity of Arab history and the Arab peoples (Aljamil, 1989; Chejne, 1960). Together these discourses form the basis of an Arab collective memory and historical culture that by some researchers have been labelled as nostalgic and focused on the portrayal of a glorious past in contrast to a chaotic and dysfunctional present (Hanafi, 2012). As historian Eric Hobsbawm noted, this is one central function of collective memory in relation to history and historical culture: from the vantage point of our present needs, we construct narratives about the past that forms the basis of historical culture and traditions (E. Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012). One problematic aspect of this view on historical culture that has been noted in research, is that it tends to present a rather limited view of the past: history is presented mostly in terms of the positive aspects of past societies and actors, which in turn leads to a highly selective history that gives rise to an incomplete and potentially misleading understanding of history among the public and its leaders (Shalak, 1994). Hence, some historians and opinion leaders have attributed the failure of the attempts of renaissance in the Arab world to the absence of an historical culture that wholly embraces the past in order to avoid presenting an idealised and nostalgic version of it (Shakry, 2021).

The present study seeks to engage with these aspects through analysing the historical content of *Noor Magazine*, which is an Egyptian based journal for children published by the Al-Azhar institution. The journal started publication in 2015 with the aim of providing Egyptian and Arabic youth with positive examples and advice in order to counter religious radicalisation, or in the words of Ahmad Al-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar:

> My dear daughters and sons, the publication of this magazine comes at a critical time in which your nation is in dire need of your strength and innovative brains. You have a moral responsibility towards this great nation since you are the youths and leaders of tomorrow. Come on dear ones! Let us study our lessons hard, save our time, and look forward to excellence. To be the real loyal men of the future is never impossible for you; you are the grandchildren of the great Egyptians who built Al-Azhar Al-Sharif and carried the Muslim culture and sciences to all people everywhere in the world, East and West[1] (Al-Tayeb, 2015).

As noted above, a prominent and recurring feature in *Noor Magazine* is a focus on Arabic and Egyptian history in popular form for children. Given these circumstances and the professed aim of the journal, we believe that this makes the *Noor Magazine* an excellent source to study the current collective memory practices and historical culture of Egypt and the Arab world. In our analyses we focused on three aspects: (i) what aspects of historical culture are prominent in *Noor Magazine*, (ii) what uses of history are constituted in the historical presentations, and (iii) how can the historical representations (theoretically) promote historical consciousness and social welfare in Egyptian society?

Previous research

Given what was written above, we can characterise the challenges of any effort in Egypt to promote a positive view on society and counter radicalism through the use of history, as being centered around two inter-related aspects that have been dealt with rather extensively in research: (i) how is history narrated? and (ii) how can history promote social welfare?

In relation to how history is narrated, research has shown that history is often narrated in a form that uses the national perspective as a more or less naturalised narrative frame (Berger & Conrad, 2015). As such, historical narratives are closely linked to matters of ethnicity and/or cultural homogeneity (Berger & Conrad, 2015; Carretero et al., 2012; Elmersjö, 2013; Giakoumis & Kalemaj, 2017; Kumar, 2002; Persson, 2016; Spjut, 2018). In this sense, history serves as a medium for legitimizing and constructing the nation state (E. J. Hobsbawm, 2012; Stoddard, 2021; Wertsch, 2000). One central aspect of this is to construct a sense of exclusivity in relation to ethnicity and/or culture: we are members of a nation because there is something exclusive about us. One common way of constructing this sense of exclusivity is to show contrast with other nations or peoples. Sometimes this is done in an explicitly hostile way where the national Other is vilified and posed as a serious threat, but it can also be done through ignoring and silencing (Giakoumis & Kalemaj, 2017; Kumar, 2002).

Another pertinent feature in relation to the narration of history highlighted in research is narrative form. American researcher James Wertsch argues that national histories often apply schematic narrative templates (Wertsch, 2002). Schematic narrative templates should be seen as abstract narrative forms that can be applied to multiple specific narratives, and these templates are often transparent to the people making use of them, thus taking on the shape of commonsensical ways of narrating historical events. According to Wertsch, when these schematic narrative templates gain wide public acceptance, they work to produce mnemonic communities with deep rooted collective ways of remembering the past as 'what really happened' (Wertsch, 2000). When these ways of perceiving the past are threatened, it can cause aggressive responses on the part of its proponents, as Wertsch has shown in present day Estonia (Wertsch, 2008). An important question then becomes how do we approach history in an inclusive way to promote social welfare and mutual understanding?

Research stresses the importance of an inclusive approach to history, where students are invited to deliberate competing narratives (Ahonen, 2017; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2017). Finnish researcher Sirkka Ahonen contends that in order for this to succeed, individuals first need to be exposed to conflicting stories, then they need tools to epistemologically assess the legitimacy of these narratives, and finally to recognise the conflicting elements in these narratives (Ahonen, 2017, p. 57). This does not necessarily entail that they agree with these conflicting narratives, but rather realise their place within historical culture and that they are able to have a dialogue about them without feeling threatened.

On a similar note, Israeli researcher Tsafrir Goldberg studied three approaches to history in Israel and their propensity to promote mutual understanding and trust between Israeli and Palestinian students (Goldberg, 2017). The official approach adopts a clear single-narrative approach to history that stresses in-group righteousness, the empathetic approach adopts multiple perspectives on the past and stresses mutual understanding between in- and out-group

members, and the critical approach adopts a disciplinary view on history that stresses a critical stance on self-legitimising narratives in order to curb bias (Goldberg, 2017, pp. 279–280). While Goldberg's study did not give any conclusive results as to which of these approaches was best served in promoting mutual understanding and trust among the informants, it showed that the official single-narrative approach only promoted out-group distrust and entrenchment among both the Israeli and Palestinian participants (Goldberg, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

From what was written above it seems plausible to claim that how we narrate history and how we approach it is contingent on three inter-related aspects. On a more general level we can argue that any reconstruction and representation of history takes place within an historical culture that precedes these reconstructions or representations. Historical culture in this sense both enables us to reconstruct and represent history and at the same time it also places constraints on these reconstructions and representations (Grever & Adriaansen, 2017). It enables us in the sense that when we enter into society there are already discourses of history present (Carr, 2014; Rüsen, 2005). How these discourses appear may differ between social contexts and societies, but we can argue that as we learn about history and as we construct meaning in the world these discourses are essential to us. They enable us to understand and participate in society (Kumar, 2002). These discourses do also, however, place limits on what is sensible or appropriate to say about history. Furthermore, we can also discern that how we approach historical narratives and, consequently, historical culture matters much. There seems to be a strong consensus in research that an uncritical adoption of historical narratives may be problematic since it reproduces one particular perspective on the past as the only legitimate one, and at the same time it omits or discards other perspectives (cf. Lévesque, 2017; Seixas, 2000). Thus, we can argue that how we make use of and understand history is important to promote social welfare.

Two history didactical concepts that enable us to describe and analyze how we use and understand history are uses of history and historical consciousness. Uses of history pertains to how we interact with the past; whenever we use history for any reason, we make a use of history (Karlsson, 2014; Thorp, 2016). From the perspective of how we use history and interact within an historical culture, we argue that there are two perspectives that are particularly interesting: (i) for what reasons do we make use of history, and, when we do make use of history, (ii) how do we represent history. In regards to reasons for using history, we can say that any use of history corresponds to some kind of need on behalf of its user (Karlsson, 2014). Hence, we use history to achieve something, and as such these uses of history can be called teleological. Swedish historian Klas-Göran Karlsson typified six different ways of using history from this perspective:

- A scientific use of history aims at obtaining and constructing new knowledge through an analytical and methodological approach;

- A politico-pedagogical use of history aims at illustrating, making public, and creating debate;

- A moral use of history aims at rediscovering and showing historical wrong-doings and shortcomings;

- An ideological use of history aims at justifying and/or arguing something, and to make sense of the past;

- An existential use of history aims at remembering, creating meaning in life, and building identities;

- A non-use of history aims covering up, concealing, or trying to make some historical events, persons or periods fall into public neglect (Karlsson, 2014, pp. 73–78).

When we apply this typology, we can discern and analyse a wide variety of ways of using history for different reasons. More importantly, however, this typology enables us to direct attention towards individual and collective representations of history and, as such, the typology offers us a way of analysing interactions with history as cultural phenomena at play in social contexts. It is also evident that what historians do at universities is merely one way of using the past that perhaps is quite marginal in a broader social context.

When it comes to analysing how individuals and collectives understand history, we can apply the second perspective of uses of history, the narratological one (Thorp, 2016). While the typology above offers us a way of reflecting on reasons for using history, it does not allow us to say anything about how we interact with history from a cognitive perspective. If we look at the narratological properties of uses of history we can discern three different ways of cognitively representing the past:

- A traditional use of history represents history as static and a-contextual;

- A critical use of history represents history as a means of destabilising or criticising historical narratives;

- A genetic use of history represents history as dynamic and contingent on perspective and context (Thorp, 2016, p. 27).

This typology allows us to analyse how history, when used, is represented cognitively. A traditional narratological use of history represents history as something disconnected from perspective and context and thus static. Historical accounts here take on the appearance of representing history as 'what really happened' and as such historical representations are conflated with past realities. The critical narratological use of history is quite similar to the traditional one, but here perspective and context are taken into account. The aim here, however, is to delegitimise rivalling historical narratives. Cognitively we can still know 'what really happened' if only we get matters right in terms of perspective and context. The genetic narratological use of history, finally, represents history as inherently contingent on perspective and context. History is always a matter of perspective and context and this refers to how we cognitively go about constructing history: we can never know 'what really happened' but we can reconstruct past events through asking questions and gathering and interpreting evidence to answer these questions.

Thus, an appreciation of perspective and context is an essential aspect of the historicity of historical representations; this is what makes them history in the first place. Importantly, this use of history acknowledges that there may be more than one legitimate narrative about any historical event depending on how and where we approach this event. Cognitively, we can see two distinct epistemic stances towards history: one that contends that history is knowable in an absolute (perhaps ontological) sense, and one that contends that history is knowable only through contextually contingent reconstructions of past events. If we relate these epistemic stances to historical consciousness, i.e. awareness of historicity (Gadamer, 1975; Jeismann, 1979; Thorp, 2017), we can see that the traditional and critical narratological uses of history do not indicate historical consciousness, while the genetic narratological use of history does. In regards to promoting an inclusive historical culture, it could thus be argued that a fostering of historical consciousness is indispensable in order to promote a complex reflexive understanding of history that takes perspective and context into consideration (Körber & Pearce, 2021; Thorp & Vinterek, 2020).

Methodology

From the perspective of the present study, we can apply this theoretical perspective to analyse the historical content in *Noor Magazine* from three perspectives: (i) what aspects of historical culture are prominent in the studied material, (ii) what uses of history, both teleological and

narratological, are applied when representing history, and (iii) how can these narratives (theoretically) stimulate historical consciousness among the readers of *Noor Magazine.*

Given that *Noor Magazine* is published in Arabic, the data collection and initial analyses were carried out by the first author of this article who is a native Arabic speaker. In total 36 issues of *Noor Magazine* were analysed. The data collection was carried out in early 2021. All issues of the magazine that were analysed were retrieved online on the website www.noormaga.com. All issues were surveyed for historical content to be used for further analyses by the first author and in total 237 accounts were coded as containing historical content.

These accounts were then closely read by the first author of this article and inductively categorised according to what geopolitical perspective that was applied, i.e. Egyptian history, Arabic and Islamic history, and Global history. The accounts that pertain only to Egypt, such as the Pharaonic civilization, or have an Arab and Islamic extension, but are presented from an exclusively Egyptian perspective, were coded as Egyptian. The accounts that present common Arabic and Muslim history, such as the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and scholars of Islamic civilisation, were coded as Arabic and Islamic. The accounts that present history in which people participate around the world, such as models of successful and pioneering personalities in literary or social and charitable work, were coded as Global. The historical accounts were then classified according to which topics they covered. Finally, quantitative analysis was applied to determine the number of historical accounts in each of the above categories to help clarify the relative importance attributed to each of them.

The first author then selected accounts suitable for further analyses in accordance with purposeful sampling strategy and translated these from Arabic into English (Palinkas et al., 2015). In the next step of the analysis, we applied the typologies of teleological and narratological uses of history in a qualitative analysis of the selected accounts in order to analyse approaches and representations of history in the accounts studied. Regarding the teleological uses of history, we coded the narratives as follows:

- Scientific: aims at promoting an academical or scientific approach to history;

- Politico-pedagogical: aims at presenting history as a good example to follow;

- Moral: aims at promoting moral values through history;

- Ideological: aims at promoting a certain understanding of the world;

- Existential: aims at promoting both collective and individual identities through history;

- Non-use: explicitly omits or silences historical events, agents or perspectives.

It should be noted that this typology is difficult to apply analytically to categorise a certain use of history since we cannot always be certain with what motives the historical narratives were presented and uses of history always exist in communicative relationship between sender and receiver (cf. Thorp, 2020), but still they can be used to reflect on what motives, however intermingled, that lay behind the narrative at hand. When coding the narratological uses of history, we proceeded as follows:

- Traditional: focusses on presenting one view of history and omits interpretative and contextual aspects of historical representation;

- Critical: focusses on criticising and/or correcting flawed or incorrect representations of history;

- Genetic: focusses on perspective and context in how history is presented.

Results

Since we conducted two different types of analyses, we have decided to divide this section into two sub-sections. In the first sub-section we focus on content in the accounts in relation to historical culture, and in the second sub-section we present the results of our analyses according to teleological and narratological perspectives on uses of history.

Historical culture

In general terms the content of the historical accounts in *Noor Magazine* is presented from three perspectives: (i) Egyptian history, (ii) Arabic and Islamic history, and (iii) Global history. Of these perspectives, Egyptian history is the dominant one, closely followed by Arabic and Islamic history (see Table 1 below).

Table 1
Perspectives and Content of Historical Accounts in 'Noor Magazine'

Egyptian history	106	**Arabic and Islamic history**	102	**Global history**	29
Military history	24	Arab and Islamic scholars	16	Historical figures	20
Ancient history	17	Political history	7	Historical events	9
Heritage from different Egyptian eras	31	Religious history	73		
Al-Azhar	7	Social history	6		
Social history	27				

Egyptian history

The accounts that were coded as military history all focus on recent Egyptian history in two time periods: from 1967-1982 and from 2011 to present time. In a chapter called "The World's Best Soldiers" the narrative focuses on the period from War 1967 until the recapture of Sinai by Egyptian forces in April 1982.[2] In the time period from 2011 until today the focus is entirely on how the Egyptian army fights jihadists in Sinai after the Egyptian revolution of 2011. The narrative starts with the terrorist attack on army forces in Sinai in 2015 and how Egyptian soldiers managed to defeat the jihadist insurgents. There is a focus on leaders and young recruits of the Egyptian army as individual heroes and martyrs with accounts of their heroic deeds or martyrdom in defense of their homeland.[3] Another example is a story about a boy called Amr who wants to go to church to help his friends after a terrorist attack on the church. His father refuses him to help his Christian friends, to which the boy replies:

> I remind you, my father, of your colleague in the October war (Peter), who sacrificed his soul for you to cross the Bar Liev line in the war, and that the one who came up with the idea of demolishing the impenetrable Bar Lev line was the Christian (Baqi Zaki Youssef). They did not leave us and say that Egypt is the homeland of Muslims, so, with your permission, I will leave in order to not be late.[4]

In the history of the Pharaonic civilization of ancient Egypt, titled 'Mother of the world,' a narrative unfolds that presents the achievements of the great civilisations of Ancient Egypt. We learn that the first dentist and the first architect in history were in Egypt, the first water channel in history was constructed in Egypt, the first regular army in the world was in Egypt, the ancient Egyptians invented papyrus and the solar calendar, established the first stone-based engineering architecture, Egypt was the first country in the world to have an organised government apparatus,

they presented the first ruling queen in history, the first thunderbolt squad in history, the first antibiotic, and the first examples of organised cultivation carried out according to specific dates.[5] Thus, there is a strong focus on scientific inventions within these accounts. There are also portrayals of cultural heritage sites in Egypt from different historical periods, such as the Mallawi Museum, Sultan Hassan Mosque, the Coptic Museum, the Hanging Church, the Textile Museum, the Agency of Bazraa, the Islamic art museum, the Citadel of Saladin, and the Military Museum.[6]

The accounts that have been coded as Al-Azhar all present the history of Al-Azhar in different eras and its role in political, cultural and scientific life. Issues 16-19 of the magazine contain a series called 'Al-Azhar Tells,' which deals with the history of Al-Azhar in chronological order, starting with the Fatimids entering Egypt in 969 AD.[7] The accounts coded as social history focus on the history of Egyptian customs in celebrating various occasions such as, the lanterns of Ramadan, the customs and history of celebrating different holidays (national and religious) throughout Egyptian history, for example the history of the customs of celebrating Eid al-Fitr. These accounts also include the histories of prominent national figures such as Ahmed Zewail who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1999, the religious scientist Imam Muhammad Abdo, and Egyptian physicist Mostafa Mosharafa.[8]

Arabic and Islamic history

In general, the Arabic history presented is closely associated to Islamic history, and there is generally a mix between Arabic and Islamic history throughout the issues of *Noor Magazine*. There are four main themes in these accounts. The first theme deals with the history of scholars who influenced human civilisation, such as Ibn Al-Haytham, Ibn Al-Nafis, Jaber Ibn Hayyan, Abbas Ibn Firnas, Abu Bakr Al-Razi, Ibn Battuta, Mary Al Astrolabe, and Al-Zarib.[9] The second theme deals with political history, such as the illustrated story 'The clock ghost,' which argues in support of the power of historical Arab rulers versus the rulers of the West, and how this power was derived from the scientific development of the Arabs. The illustrated story 'I will not bow to anyone but Allah' details the relationship between Arab rulers and their Roman counterparts. Other topics are the Islamic caliphate, the spread of Islam, and the treatment of non-Muslims in the Islamic world.[10] The third theme deals with religious history, such as the biography of the Prophet Muhammad which is presented in issues 10 to 36, and stories from the Holy Quran, which recur in each issue. Finally, the fourth theme deals with the general history of the social life of the Arabs. One interesting example from this category is a dialogue between two individuals on the spread of Islam, that clearly argues against warfare as a means of spreading religion:

> Person 1: 'We must regain our glory, and go back to conquering the world again under the banner of Islam.'
>
> Person 2: 'Since when was Islam an invader, an attacker? There is a big difference between the conquests that took place peacefully and tyrannical invasions. You prove the claim of the enemies of Islam that we are a religion that was spread by the sword. Has Islam invaded Indonesia and Malaysia? Of course not. Islam has spread there due to the good behavior and honesty of Muslim merchants. Religion is good treatment of people.'
>
> Person 1: 'Yes, but we fought the Persians and conquered Egypt with the army.'
>
> Person 2: 'As for the Persians, they were the people of occupation, and Khosrow tore up the book of the Messenger and demanded that his governor on the Arabian Peninsula bring Muhammad to kill him, so they were the ones who started the war. As for Egypt, it was occupied by the Romans, and their oppression of the people of Egypt intensified, so the Muslims entered it in defense of humanity, and they were not forced to change their religion, so that some historians describe the joy of the Egyptians at the arrival of the Muslim armies. My friend, is it correct to describe the one about whom God Almighty said "and we have not sent you except as a mercy to the worlds" as the invader'?[11]

Global history

Global history, which is devoted the least space in *Noor Magazine*, generally focusses on individuals and their accomplishments. The focus of these narratives is international personalities from history and explanations how they succeeded in their lives and affected humanity. We meet historical persons such as scientist Thomas Edison, cartoonist Walt Disney, writer Carlo Goldoni, and Mother Teresa, among others.[12] International historical events and traditions, such as the story of the Marathon, the history of the Olympic Games, the celebration of New Year's Day, the history of popular Western food items (e.g. Kentucky chicken, pizza, sandwich), and important scientific interventions in history.[13]

Uses of history

Teleological uses of history

The dominant teleological uses of history in *Noor Magazine* are the politico-pedagogical, moral, and ideological uses of history. The politico-pedagogical uses of history generally focus on showing positive examples from history to motivate the young readership to work and seek knowledge (e.g. the sections 'Noor and the gate of history' and 'Al-Azhar tells'), to remind them that they are the descendants of Muslim scholars who enlightened the world, and that they are the descendants of the Egyptians who built the Al-Azhar mosque and preserved the culture of Islam and Muslim science. There is a strong focus on science and scientific development among the politico-pedagogical uses of history, as is shown in the following example:

> Japan was hit in World War II by the worst massacre in history when America dropped two atomic bombs that killed thousands in an instant. The Japanese understood that the reason for their defeat was that their enemy was more knowledgeable. They paid great attention to science until they became at the forefront of countries in science, and the first among countries in morals, due to their respect for science and ethics.[14]

Here we learn that the Japanese chose to focus on science and hard work in order to stave off the threat of the American enemies, which illustrates the importance of zeal for the young readers of the magazine. This quotation also shows how intermingled teleological uses of history may be, since what we get here is not only a story of the importance of science and hard work, but also an explanation of how the world works: the country with the most scientific power, will also be the leader of the world. As such, this quotation was also coded as an ideological use of history.

The ideological uses of history prominent in *Noor Magazine* also focus on the necessity of work and search of knowledge as the only way to salvation and renaissance. In the story of 'The Clock Ghost' we learn about a gift presented by Harun al-Rashid, a Muslim ruler in the Abbasid era, to Charlemagne in 807 A.D., a period when we learn that Europe was mired in backwardness and ignorance, while the Arabs were at the height of their scientific glory.[15] At the end of the story a sentence directed to the reader says:

> Know, my son, that your ancestors, the Arab scholars, had a great merit over European civilization when they were aware of the value of knowledge. Are you striving to restore their glories?[16]

While this example clearly argues for a specific understanding of historical progression as closely linked to scientific progress, there is also another ideological undercurrent that posits Western civilisation or the West as the historical *Other* that poses a threat (as in the example with Japan above), or has displaced Arab and Egyptian societies as the leaders of the world, even though all major scientific inventions are claimed to stem from ancient Egypt or the medieval Arab world. In this sense, the West has taken the position as leader of the world which was not theirs in the first place. As such, this example was also coded as a moral use of history: history is used to portray how Egyptian and Arab civilizations used to be superior to Western ones. Another example of an

ideological and moral use of history is present in the illustrated story 'Religion is for God and the homeland for all,' which tells the story of the coordinated struggle of Muslims and Christians in Egypt in the attempt of ousting the British colonial power in the revolution of 1919 despite British efforts to set Egyptian Muslims and Christians against each other in order to maintain power.[17] The image presented here is that national unity will benefit the strength of Egyptian society.

Narratological uses of history

The dominant narratological use of history in *Noor Magazine* is the traditional one, as has been portrayed in the examples above. What we get is history from a zero-perspective that is devoid of perspective and context, resulting in a conflation between history and the past. Instead, the naturalised context is that of contemporary Egypt and the contemporary Arab world, and the common perspective is that of national and Muslim unity particularly in relation to the West and radical interpretations of Islam. The narratives stress the importance of hard work, scientific development, and moderate interpretations of Islam.

While there are no examples in *Noor Magazine* of genetic narratological uses of history, there are examples of critical ones. These critical uses of history are all guided towards perceived misconceptions promoted by Islamic terrorists and extremists and take the form of historically informed dialogues between moderate and radical interpretations of Islam on issues such as the return of the Islamic Caliphate, the murder of a Christian wine merchant in 2017, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in 2015, the Botroseya Church bombing in 2016, the Al-Rawda Mosque bombing in Bir al-Abed, Sinai, Egypt, and other ISIS related acts.[18] Individuals who believe in radical interpretations of Islam are presented as having false ideas because they have not learned the religion at the hands of specialists and interpret the Quran and Sunnah according to their whims, and confuse the history of Islam with the history of Muslims. Another example of a critical narratological use of history is presented in the accounts of scientists Jabir Ibn Hayyan (721-813 AD) and Abbas Ibn Firnas (810-887 AD). Hayyan was accused of working with magic, assaulted, and his laboratory burned, and Firnas was accused of insanity, witchcraft, and sorcery by ignorant people.[19] The examples are thus used to portray how ignorance is always the seed of extremism and terrorism and that knowledge and science is the only way forward. Thus, the narratives aim to replace inaccurate historical narratives with accurate ones.

Concluding discussion

In conclusion, we want to stress that the historical content of *Noor Magazine* reflects the cultural and political context during the period of its publication to a high degree. While there was criticism in Egyptian society of Al-Azhar and its political and cultural role, the magazine presents Al-Azhar as a kind of national nexus and safeguard of the Egyptian state and culture throughout history (Brown, 2011). When the Egyptian army was criticised in Egypt after the ousting of President Mursi, *Noor Magazine* published accounts to show that Egyptian soldiers were the best soldiers in the world and stressed the sacrifices made by the Egyptian army in order to preserve the Egyptian nation. At a time when ISIS appeared to distort the image of Islam, we get accounts presenting a moderate image of Islam by introducing children to scholars of Islamic civilisation. In the continuous attempts to distinguish between the two elements of the Egyptian nation (Muslims and Christians), events and places that testify to the unity of the Egyptian people are presented. As such, it can be argued that history is consciously used to address contemporary societal issues in Egypt. Another conspicuous feature in *Noor Magazine* is its inclusive focus on minorities in Egyptian society and their role in Egyptian history.[20]

From what has been presented above, we can discern a fourfold strategy that is consistently employed in *Noor Magazine* when presenting history to protect children from extremist ideology: (i) the historical example is used to strengthen pride and a sense of belonging to the entire nation, (ii) the historical example is used to enhance tolerance and co-existence in Egyptian society, (iii) the historical example is used to confront extremists' uses of history and promote a moderate

view of Islam, and (iv) the historical example is used to argue the importance of science as the only path to advancement and elevation. The first strategy seeks to support unity and promote pride in Egyptian society through stressing the continuity of Egyptian history and imposing the modern Egyptian nation as the narrative frame through which the past is narrated. Historical discontinuities, such as Egypt before and after Islamisation, and historical conflicts between Islamic, Arabic, and national historical trends are passed over to construct what has been called an integrated Egyptian nationalism (Gershoni & Jankowski, 1995). Furthermore, this strategy confronts the thought of religious extremists who believe that belonging, pride, and loyalty should be to religion and not to the Egyptian nation. The history presented also constructs the narrative template of the golden age narrative, where contemporary problems are juxtaposed with a glorious past that should be coveted and approximated (Spjut, 2018).

In relation to the second strategy, we can see that *Noor Magazine* uses what we might call positive modeling through the use of history by persistently presenting positive models of tolerance and coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Egypt through history. Moreover, it seeks to refute the historical arguments on which the extremists rely to justify religious intolerance, which leads us to the third strategy in which history is used to confront extremists' use of history. This strategy aims at providing counter-arguments to extremist groups that often rely on historical practices and interpretations of religious texts to justify their actions and consolidate and support their extremist ideas (Awan, 2016). The main argument, as we have shown above, is to focus on historical examples to show that violence cannot be a path to leadership, but rather that of knowledge and scientific evolution. Which leads us to the fourth strategy: using history to promote an understanding of the importance of science. The narratives consistently show that it is only through a serious study of the past great deeds of Egyptian and Arab scholars, and scientific advances that Egypt can solve its contemporary problems, i.e. religious extremism and reliance on the West.

In one sense, these strategies reflect a tradition in which the Quran uses history as an educational tool in order to learn from the past. This strategy is one of the more common aspects of the Islamic view of the function of history in society, and might explain the influence of a traditional and doctrinal use of history in *Noor Magazine*, and Egyptian society at large (Abdou, 2016). Thus, religion is closely connected to the study of history and history is meant to provide us with good examples of how to conduct our lives (Qasim, 1982).

If we relate these findings to what has been established in research, we can see that *Noor Magazine* aims at providing a new model for children's media with a strong focus on history that is related to contemporary issues, which in itself is unusual for Arab media directed at children. This may open the way to include these controversial topics in history textbooks and various media presented to Arab children, which would promote an historical understanding among the youth that would enable them to make connections between their present-day lives and the history covered in school. As such, we argue that history is used to promote social welfare. However, we can also see that the history presented in *Noor Magazine* neither introduces its readers to disciplinary aspects of Egyptian history, nor addresses its readers in an inclusive dialogue on the Egyptian past. Instead, the accounts typically employ a single-narrative a-contextual traditional narratological use of history that clearly defines the in- and out-groups of Egyptian history, something research has shown to be potentially problematic. An important caveat here is, of course, that in order for us to say something with any degree of certainty regarding this, we would have to study how Egyptian children and youth interpret and interact with these narratives.

Thus, it can be argued that the strategies employed in *Noor Magazine* may build an awareness of history and how it relates to contemporary society, but not the contextual contingencies that characterise historical narratives and our encounters with them that is instrumental in fostering a complex understanding of history and historical consciousness. Therefore, we tentatively argue that presenting history to children should be done in a way that is broader than fostering pride or giving guidance. A one-sided presentation of history only focusing on the positive aspects of the past does not achieve a 'true' picture of history. Rather, we would like to argue for the importance

of showing children a balanced picture of Egyptian, Arab and Islamic history; a history full of victories and accomplishments, but also failures and competing perspectives on the past that we must appreciate in order to avoid their impact on our present and future. Instead of nurturing nostalgia, history can be used to engage with the complexities, continuities, and discontinuities that characterise both historical and contemporary societies.

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Endnotes

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[1] All translations from Arabic to English by the first author of this article.

[2] e.g. *Noor Magazine* 3, 2016, p. 12–13.

[3] e.g. *Noor Magazine* 1, 2015, p. 17; *Noor Magazine* 4, 2016, p. 10–11; *Noor Magazine* 13, 2016, pp. 24–25.

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