

# Documenting Events in Times of Crisis Investigating Traditional and Contemporary Thai Archival Practices

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Number 93, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089686ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089686ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian Archivists

ISSN

0318-6954 (print)

1923-6409 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sucha-xaya, N. (2022). Documenting Events in Times of Crisis: Investigating Traditional and Contemporary Thai Archival Practices. *Archivaria*, (93), 42–71. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089686ar>

Article abstract

Traditional Thai archival practice, which consists of documenting events and ceremonies, can be traced to the activities of royal scribes in past centuries. Today, this practice is carried out by national archivists, far removed from people's daily lives. However, current digital transformations and participatory, networked culture are making documentation more relevant now than in the past – and to virtually everyone.

Focusing on records from times of historic emergencies, this article aims to understand Thai documentation behaviour from a socio-cultural perspective, with an eye toward considering how to adjust traditional archival practice to the contemporary Thai context. Archival sources documenting two crises – the Franco-Siamese military conflict of 1893 and a catastrophic tropical storm in southern Thailand in 1962 – are compared with new social media-based documentation consisting of posts, comments, and other activity during the cave rescue incident in northern Thailand in 2018. This comparison is complemented by insights from national archivists and other documentation experts regarding their experiences and their thoughts on the future of Thai archival practice.

Together, this comparison and these insights show that Thai documentation retained some of its original principles and functions in Thai society when it moved into a digital landscape, but there is still room for it to become more engaging and, in some ways, better suited to common understandings of archives as a “hall of fame.” This article suggests that Thai archivists should embrace a participatory archives model in which professional archivists remain essential but shift their focus from recording and guarding information to fostering the reliability and sustainability of documentation.

# Archivaria

The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

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*Archivaria* 93 (Spring 2022), pp. 42-71

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### Cite this article:

Sucha-Xaya, Naya. "Documenting Events in Times of Crisis: Investigating Traditional and Contemporary Thai Archival Practices". *Archivaria* 93 (Spring 2022): 42-71. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13835>

# Documenting Events in Times of Crisis

## Investigating Traditional and Contemporary Thai Archival Practices<sup>1</sup>

NAYA SUCHA-XAYA

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**ABSTRACT** Traditional Thai archival practice, which consists of documenting events and ceremonies, can be traced to the activities of royal scribes in past centuries. Today, this practice is carried out by national archivists, far removed from people's daily lives. However, current digital transformations and participatory, networked culture are making documentation more relevant now than in the past – and to virtually everyone.

Focusing on records from times of historic emergencies, this article aims to understand Thai documentation behaviour from a socio-cultural perspective, with an eye toward considering how to adjust traditional archival practice to the contemporary Thai context. Archival sources documenting two crises – the Franco-Siamese military conflict of 1893 and a catastrophic tropical storm in southern Thailand in 1962 – are compared with new social media-based documentation consisting of posts, comments, and other activity during the cave rescue incident in northern Thailand in 2018. This comparison is complemented by insights from national archivists and other documentation experts regarding their experiences and their thoughts on the future of Thai archival practice.

Together, this comparison and these insights show that Thai documentation retained some of its original principles and functions in Thai society when it moved into a digital landscape, but there is still room for it to become more engaging and, in some ways, better suited to common understandings of archives as a “hall of fame.” This article suggests that Thai archivists should embrace a

<sup>1</sup> This research project is funded by the grants for development of new faculty staff, Ratchadaphiseksomphot Endowment Fund, Chulalongkorn University.

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**RÉSUMÉ** La pratique archivistique traditionnelle thaïlandaise, qui consiste à documenter les événements et les cérémonies, remonte aux activités des scribes royaux des siècles passés. Aujourd'hui, cette pratique est exercée par des archivistes nationaux, très éloignés de la vie quotidienne des gens. Cependant, les transformations numériques actuelles et la culture participative et en réseau rendent la documentation plus pertinente aujourd'hui que par le passé - et pour pratiquement tout le monde.

En se concentrant sur des documents de périodes d'urgence historiques, cet article vise à comprendre le comportement thaïlandais en matière de documentation d'un point de vue socioculturel, afin de voir comment adapter la pratique archivistique traditionnelle au contexte thaïlandais contemporain. Les sources archivistiques documentant deux crises – le conflit militaire franco-siamois de 1893 et une tempête tropicale catastrophique dans le sud de la Thaïlande en 1962 – sont comparées à la nouvelle documentation tirée des médias sociaux, constituée de messages, de commentaires et d'autres activités pendant l'incident de sauvetage de la grotte dans le nord de la Thaïlande en 2018. Cette comparaison est accompagnée des commentaires d'archivistes nationaux et d'autres experts en documentation quant à leurs expériences et leurs réflexions sur l'avenir de la pratique archivistique thaïlandaise.

Ensemble, cette comparaison et ces réflexions montrent que la documentation thaïlandaise a conservé certains de ses principes et de ses fonctions d'origine dans la société thaïlandaise lors de son passage à un environnement numérique, mais qu'elle peut encore devenir plus attrayante et, à certains égards, mieux adaptée aux conceptions communes des archives comme « temple de la renommée ». Cet article suggère que les archivistes thaïlandais devraient adopter un modèle d'archives participatives dans lequel les archivistes professionnels restent essentiels, mais déplacent leur objectif de la documentation et la conservation de l'information vers la valorisation de la fiabilité et de la viabilité de la documentation.

## Introduction

Documenting – the act of archiving things to serve as evidence for humanity – takes place when people archive materials from significant events or times to remember and learn from what happened. With their different cultures, lifestyles, and contexts, societies through the ages have had different ways of recording these events according to their recordkeeping cultures.<sup>2</sup> Thailand, for example, has a legacy of officially recording events – especially rituals and significant occasions – based on the practices of traditional scribes. Traditional Thai archival practice can be dated back to the Ayutthaya period (1350–1767), when dynastic history was recorded in the form of chronicles based on the diaries of the royal scribe, or *alak*. This kind of diary was called *jotmai het*, which today is the term used for archives. The background of this term suggests that, for Thai society in general, a core attribute of today's archives (*jotmai het*) is that they – like the *jotmai het* of the Ayutthaya period – serve as a basis for history.

Thai scribes, or traditional archivists, were both records creators and providers of historical materials for writing history. Although this practice was once thought to be unique to Thai archivists, other cultures (e.g., China and Korea) have also employed it. Although there have been few studies<sup>3</sup> on this aspect of recordkeeping history, in light of the history of strong Sino-Siamese relations, it is plausible that Siam had a connection with China's recordkeeping tradition. According to Zhiying Lian, during the period from the Han dynasty to the Qing dynasty in China, a royal secretary called the *shiguan* was charged with recording royal speeches and daily events in the royal court. The *shiguan* also had the duty of writing history in the form of chronicles, while the records manager was a different person altogether, called the *li*.<sup>4</sup> Winai Pongsripian has explained that, during the Zhou dynasty, these *shiguan* were bound by moral

2 Gillian Oliver and Fiorella Foscarini, *Records Management and Information Culture: Tackling the People Problem* (London: Facet Publishing, 2014); Geoffrey Yeo, *Records, Information and Data: Exploring the Role of Record Keeping in an Information Culture* (London: Facet Publishing, 2018).

3 For the ancient Thai practice of Thai documentation, see Songsan Nilkamhaeng, "Kanborihan ngan chotmai het nai prathet Thai" [Archival Management in Thailand] (master's thesis, Chulalongkorn University, 1974), 33–35. For Chinese recordkeeping culture, please see Geoffrey Yeo, *Record-Making and Record-Keeping in Early Societies* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021).

4 Zhiying Lian, "A History of Archival Idea and Practice in China," in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemish, and Andrew J. Lau (Clayton, VIC: Monash University, 2017).

precepts. They would surrender to death rather than write something that strayed from the truth, and they espoused the principle, “Exalt righteous people, blame the wicked.”<sup>5</sup> While evidence of such an orientation has not been found in traditional Thai recordkeeping, it is possible that the practice of recording history was adapted to suit the Thai context. Notably, Thai chronicles do include opinions of the *alak*. This contradicts reports of today’s Thai archivists in charge of documentation, who said in interviews for this research that they comply with the principle of maintaining objectivity and observe the practice of compiling drafts from multiple archivists’ perspectives to ensure accuracy.

Traditional Thai archival practices dominated until Western concepts of recordkeeping came to the country in the 19th century. During the reign of King Rama V (1868–1910), a modern recordkeeping system based on Western theory was introduced and effectively practised in support of widespread bureaucratic and administrative reforms. Later, during the reign of King Rama VII (1925–1935), when the absolute monarchy was replaced by a constitutional monarchy, the effectiveness of this records management system declined because of the decentralization of governmental departments, resulting in multiple recordkeeping systems, which were not unified.<sup>6</sup>

Ever since, modern “universal” (i.e., Western) recordkeeping practices have been dominant and have been adopted by private and civic organizations as well. However, in the National Archives of Thailand (NAT), these recordkeeping practices are carried out alongside vestiges of the traditional practice. The NAT has an event documentation team, which, in accordance with the country’s National Archives Act B.E. 2556 (2013),<sup>7</sup> is responsible for recording events such as royal ceremonies, state ceremonies, and religious ceremonies;

5 Winai Pongsripijan, *Ming Sue Lu – Shing Sue Lu: bantuek rueang ching haeng ratchawong Ming lae ratchawong Ching ton waduai Sayam* หมิงสื่อลู-ซิงสื่อลู บันทึกเรื่องจริงแห่งราชวงศ์หมิงและราชวงศ์ชิง ตอนว่าด้วยสยาม [Ming Sue Lu – Shing Sue Lu: Record of Fact of Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty about Siam] (Nonthaburi, TH: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Foundation, 2016).

6 Somsuang Prudtikul, “Records and Archives Management in Thailand” (paper presented at the Annual Congress of the International Federation of Library Associations, Bangkok, Thailand, 1999), accessed December 5, 2013, [http://tla.tiac.or.th/ifla/ifla99\\_20.htm](http://tla.tiac.or.th/ifla/ifla99_20.htm).

7 National Archives of Thailand, “Visaitat panthakit yutthasat วิสัยทัศน์ พันธกิจ ยุทธศาสตร์” [Vision, Mission, Strategies], National Archives of Thailand, accessed January 2, 2020, <https://www.nat.go.th/เกี่ยวกับหน่วยงาน/วิสัยทัศน์-พันธกิจ-ยุทธศาสตร์>; National Archives of Thailand, “Phra ratcha banyat jotmai het haeng chat pho so 2556 พระราชบัญญัติจัดหมายเหตุแห่งชาติ พ.ศ. 2556” [National Archives Act B.E. 2556, 2013], National Archives of Thailand, accessed January 2, 2020, <https://www.nat.go.th/กฎหมาย/พระราชบัญญัติ/รายละเอียดพระราชบัญญัติ/ArticleId/2/-2556>.

accumulating records on nationally significant events; and producing comprehensive oral histories. This team often ends up focusing more on preserving cultural heritage than on documenting modern social phenomena (although this does still occur from time to time). This tendency comes partly from the fact that the National Archives is under the Ministry of Culture's Fine Arts Department, which is responsible for managing the country's cultural heritage. The documentation method it uses is seen as a unique and traditional way of documenting history in Thai culture and is therefore itself thought of as needing to be faithfully maintained.

Furthermore, the general public still tends to associate the word *archives* with the more familiar traditional practices, suggesting that these older practices better match the expectations of archives users and other Thai citizens. The conditions of today's society reflect changing needs for archives and, specifically, for the practice of recording events. The digital transformation has led to an overload of data and information, more varied subject matter available to be archived, and wider participation in and engagement with cultural heritage<sup>8</sup> as well as to ethical considerations such as the need to protect individuals' privacy when documenting sensitive events on social media, for instance.<sup>9</sup> Some adjustments to archival practices are necessitated by these changes. Firstly, immediate, proactive acquisition of digital records has become necessary. Secondly, the interpretation of the word *archives* in the academic archival world is expanding to include broader meanings of memory and cultural heritage than were previously considered. For example, social media posts can now potentially be considered archives, whereas only records created by organizations or families were captured before. These developments all raise some important questions for Thailand: How can traditional Thai documentation be developed and applied in contemporary times while being built up from its roots? Can this practice be more participatory and used by larger groups of people, in addition to historians?

8 Natalie Pang, Kai Khiun Liew, and Brenda Chan, "Participatory Archives in a World of Ubiquitous Media," *Archives and Manuscripts* 42, no. 1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2014.905234>.

9 Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, and Vernon Mitchell, "Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations" (Documenting the Now white paper, Docnow, April 2018), <https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnow-whitepaper-2018.pdf>.

The Thai situation also offers an example of an “archival multiverse,”<sup>10</sup> in that it allows us to examine an information culture in a different recordkeeping context and to consider non-Western interpretations of archival practices, for example, keeping archives that are beyond the customary scope of Western archives.<sup>11</sup> This more diversified meaning of *archives* is what Mark Greene has claimed is powerful in the “archival paradigm”<sup>12</sup> – the function of archives in history and cultural heritage that encompasses things such as community archives. He contrasts this with the “recordkeeping paradigm,” which is more connected with the keeping of official records in organizations as evidence. Archives from minority groups with different practices have also been increasingly considered as belonging to the archival realm as an awareness of diversity has taken a more central position.<sup>13</sup> This focus on diversity is coupled with an acceptance that archival practices in different contexts are themselves dynamic and developing in their own right. Along with these dynamic innovations and interpretations, this article seeks to understand Thai documentation behaviour and to identify potential adaptations of traditional archival practice to the contemporary Thai context by investigating, analyzing, and giving appropriate recommendations in response to the changes observed.

## Understanding Thai Archives

*Archives* originally referred to documentation in the royal court. The word *jotmai*het has been used in various other ways as well. Apart from describing materials used to make chronicles, the word can also refer to royal diaries, newspapers, and special recordings of particular significant events. This broad sense of documentation differs from modern Western concepts of archives, which generally refer to “records” as by-products of activities or transactions. However, the word *jotmai*het

10 Shannon Faulkhead and Kirsten Thorpe, “Dedication: Archives and Indigenous Communities,” in Gilliland, McKemish, and Lau, *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, 3–8.

11 Sue McKemish, Tom Chandler, and Shannon Faulkhead, “Imagine: A Living Archive of People and Place ‘Somewhere Beyond Custody,’” *Archival Science* 19, no. 3 (2019): 281–301, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09320-0>.

12 Mark Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002), <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.65.1.1914668v881ww19n>.

13 See, for example, the discussion of the pluralizing dimension in the records continuum in McKemish, Chandler, and Faulkhead, “Imagine.”



has also come to be used for records in the modern sense, which in Thailand has been mixed with traditional understandings of archives since the bureaucratic reforms under King Rama V mentioned above. Studies<sup>14</sup> have shown that this mixed understanding of archives has an impact on archival work. People from outside the archival profession tend to perceive of archives as ancient materials unrelated to their daily lives, and this contributes to problems such as a failure to transfer records to the NAT and a low level of archival use among people who perceive archives to be something distant from their lives. Although a gap exists between traditional and modern archives, this gap has never been clearly reconciled; and although the traditional practices are still being carried out, their roots are not being studied, and the practices are not being developed to fit contemporary society. It is thus valuable to reassess the meaning of the traditional archives and its functions and applications in today's context.

The digital transformation that has affected all parts of society represents a big change for the archival world as well. It has led archivists to revise their theories and methods in order to deal with new forms of media. Interestingly, some of the approaches required in the new era are similar to those in traditional Thai archival practices. For instance, due to the tendency of new media to quickly become obsolete, immediate documentation and archiving has become necessary. The ancient Thai scribes did the same thing by recording events and keeping their archives daily.

Today, there is a wider variety of media available, and greater autonomy in the act of archiving has created more participatory models in the recordkeeping world. Archivists are thus moving from roles as gatekeepers to roles as facilitators of recordkeeping activities. This significant change also needs to be considered when adapting traditional recordkeeping to today's context. As documentation and recordkeeping can now increasingly be carried out by the public, archivists should assume responsibility for mentoring users about the principles of documenting and archiving.<sup>15</sup>

14 Naya Sucha-xaya, "The Unfit Puzzle: Archival Value and Society in Contemporary Thailand" (PhD dissertation, University College London, 2017); Waraporn Poolsatitawat, "Identification of the Factors Shaping Archival Education in Thailand and an Investigation into the Effectiveness of that Education in Preparing Graduates for the Archival Workplace" (PhD dissertation, University of Liverpool, 2017), 285.

15 Chris Hurley, "Recordkeeping and Accountability," in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, ed. Sue McKemish, Michael Piggott, and Barbara Reed (Wagga Wagga, NSW: Centre for Information Studies, Charles Sturt University, 2005), 241.

## Traditional Thai Archives

Recording events, the traditional approach of Thai archival practice, tends to be criticized by those Thai archivists and scholars who are strong supporters of Western archival principles. They contend that this practice contradicts the Western approach to records and archives management because the output is primarily documentation created by the archivists themselves. The archives that come from this practice, therefore, are often judged as secondary historical evidence and not as reliable as “archives in the Western understanding.”<sup>16</sup> As reflected in my previous research,<sup>17</sup> Thai people who are not information professionals, on the other hand, do typically see these archives as the *jomaihet* (archives) that they know of as, to them, archives are about keeping history and preserving memories for future generations. The idea of archives that are related to daily life is unfamiliar to those outside the profession. Expert archives users, such as historians, often rely on records from both traditional documentation and contemporary Western archival practices. They tend to give more weight to records that fit the Western idea of reliable records than to those resulting from traditional practices, while they use traditional archives to complement these records.

While I was researching this article, an archivist from the NAT explained that one benefit of archives that come from recording events is that the records are all gathered at the time of the events, when the archivist was present to observe the occasion and gather information.<sup>18</sup> In addition, archives that come from event documentation – notwithstanding the authenticity issue (records gathered by the event documentation team are photocopies of the originals) – are simply not lost, as the information is captured by the archivists from the beginning. This is an important consideration because acquisition is typically problematic in Thailand, where records being kept (or thrown away) by the government agencies themselves may never make their way to the NAT. For all these reasons, the records from event documentation in Thailand retain a

<sup>16</sup> Archivist A, interview with the author, October 10, 2019. All interviews were conducted in Thai and translated into English by the author.

<sup>17</sup> Sucha-xaya, “The Unfit Puzzle,” 174.

<sup>18</sup> Archivist B, interview with the author, February 29, 2019.

high level of proximity to history.<sup>19</sup> Although these documentation methods are based on traditional practices, they actually correspond closely to modern digital archives management practices.

## The Thai Archives as a “Hall of Fame”

Dating back to scribe culture, the practice of keeping records in Thailand tended to focus on keeping “positive” things. The NAT was founded in 1883 for the purpose of keeping records from the newly reformed bureaucracy in order to provide evidence for history.<sup>20</sup> Apart from the NAT, which is responsible for this mission at the national level, other archives were founded to be memorial halls within institutions. For example, a trend in the 20th century was to establish university archives, which function as memorial halls to uphold the honour and reputable memories of the institutions. A memorial hall, or hall-of-fame collection, is a familiar institution for most Thai people. With its focus on positive or honourable narratives over evidence that could harm a person’s reputation or an organization’s image, this practice also corresponds with the common Thai cultural trait of avoiding conflicts in order to preserve relationships – the base upon which people’s social and professional lives are built.<sup>21</sup> This is why archival materials are seen as having cultural purposes and are kept mostly in various cultural institutions. Archives have not taken on functions different from this cultural one, and the idea of archives as evidence, especially relating to rights and accountability, does not seem to have taken hold among the wider public.<sup>22</sup>

What is then the proper role of Thai archives in a democratic society, and what criteria and methods should be used to collect memories? This study attempts to address these questions by considering examples of documentary evidence along with current stakeholders’ experiences and opinions.

19 Archivist B, interview, February 29, 2019.

20 The National Library, “Ho Samut Haeng Chat chak adit tueng patchuban หอสมุดแห่งชาติจากอดีตถึงปัจจุบัน” [The National Library: Past and Present] (Bangkok: The National Library, 1985).

21 Suntaree Komin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bangkok: Research Centre, National Institute of Development Administration, 1990), 242.

22 Sucha-xaya, “The Unfit Puzzle,” 139–40; Poolsatitwat, “Identification of the Factors Shaping Archival Education,” 16.

## Investigating Event Documentation Then and Now

This article looks at these issues through an information culture lens by comparing examples of past documentation of events with current trends in similar situations. In particular, it focuses on the documentation of events in times of crisis, which stands out as especially worthy of study because crises are typically felt widely across society – transcending special interest groups, classes, professional spheres, and so on. At the NAT, the documentation of crises falls within the purview of the event documentation team, especially if the event in question is seen as nationally significant. As these events often affect a wide cross-section of stakeholders, archives professionals need co-operation and solidarity from different parts of society to fully capture the impact of the event.

In this article, I compare two examples of jotmaiht (archives) recording events during times of crisis or disaster in the 19th and 20th centuries with modern-day practices – both official documentation at the NAT and public documentation on social media. To gain a more inclusive view that broadly reflects the information culture existing in Thailand today, I include in the scope of this study online documentation on Facebook – in this case, social media documentation of an internationally recognized event: the rescue of a youth football team from a cave in northern Thailand in 2018. In support of this part of the study, I reviewed relevant literature and interviewed national archivists and experts in documentation in Thailand to obtain their perspectives on the subject.

Here, it may be appropriate to refer to the ways in which some anthropologists view information behaviour in its cultural context. For instance, in his rupture theory of globalization, Arjun Appadurai argued that different parts of the world have received currents of globalization unequally.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Daniel Miller found, in his research on social media, that people in nine fieldwork sites around the world used social media differently, according to their contexts.<sup>24</sup> The documentation of events in times of crisis shows both change and continuity: some traditional cultural elements are persistent while other factors shift – often as a result of globalization and digital technology. Since the manifestations of globalization and

23 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

24 Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, Juliano Spyer, Shriram Venkatraman, and Xinyuan Wang, *How the World Changed Social Media* (London: UCL Press, 2016).

the ways of engaging with technology differ between cultures, contextualization of information behaviour is necessary.

## Research Methodology

This article builds on a research project that aimed to study the evolution of traditional Thai archival practice (documenting history), focusing on emergency situations. The main research question for this study was, How has documenting in Thai society changed, and how can it be developed for the benefit of contemporary Thai society?

Focusing on emergency situations is a worthwhile approach for two reasons: first, it narrows the scope of the research; and second, emergencies are times of damage and widespread collaboration, typically affecting many groups of people and attracting their engagement and their recognition of the importance of documentation and archives.

To more fully address the main research question, the project also considered how Thai documentation practice has evolved in terms of (1) structure and method, (2) content, and (3) use. It did so particularly by looking at two aspects: what documentation needs and formats exist today in Thai documentation, and how traditional knowledge and practices can be applied to respond to today's use.

The research comprised two main activities:

### 1. Content Analysis

Two archives or *jotmai*het from times of emergency were selected to illuminate the structure and methods, content, and use of archives in the past – namely, *Jotmai*het Rattanakosin Era 112,<sup>25</sup> which chronicles events surrounding the Franco-Siamese military crisis of 1893, and “Laem Wipayok,” a Thai doctor's eyewitness account of a catastrophic tropical storm in southern Thailand in 1962. Qualitative analysis of these archives was applied because traditional archives are usually in the form of narratives; this is partly why traditional Thai *jotmai*het are studied frequently as historical evidence but are rarely considered from the perspective of archival management.

25 Department of Fine Arts, “*Jotmai*het Rattanakosin ro so 112 จดหมายเหตุ ร.ศ. 112” [*Jotmai*het Rattanakosin Era 112] (Bangkok: Department of Fine Arts, 1940).

The data gathered from these two archives were then compared with new kinds of documentation and the current documentation of events at the NAT. The research also considered contemporary documentation (which was also subjected to content analysis); this consisted of Facebook posts surrounding the Wild Boars football team cave rescue incident in northern Thailand in 2018. These posts were gathered from the page titled “Thai NavySEAL,”<sup>26</sup> the official Facebook page of the main rescue team. Although many teams from different parts of the country and other countries were involved in the mission, the “Thai NavySEAL” page became a trusted source that many people followed for updates on the rescue and that various news outlets relied on.

Data collection related to this contemporary event focused on a total of 200 posts from the “Thai NavySEAL” page covering the period from the beginning of the search and rescue mission and through the rescue itself until after the mission was successfully completed (i.e., until news about the rescue stopped appearing on the page). Here again, the content was subjected to quantitative analysis. Although many researchers might choose to apply an application programming interface (API)<sup>27</sup> to harvest data from social media, gathering data manually and analyzing it qualitatively could yield insights that – while the sample size might have been relatively small – were especially “thick.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Facebook posts on other pages on the same topic were also located and investigated through relevant hashtags.<sup>29</sup>

## 2. Interviews

Data was also gathered from five in-depth interviews: during the period from October to December 2019, I interviewed three archivists at the NAT and two

26 “Thai NavySEAL” (now renamed “Thai Navy SEAL Foundation”) Facebook page, accessed 30 January 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/ThaiSEALFoundation/>.

27 An application programming interface (API) “is the way a supplier of a software application enables a user to integrate this application with the user’s own programs and indeed with other software applications.” Arnold Burdett, Dan Bowen, Diana Butler, Aline Cumming, Frank Hurvid, Adrian Jackson, John Jaworski, et al., *BCS Glossary of Computing*, 14th ed. (Swindon, UK: BCS Learning and Development Limited, The Chartered Institute for IT, 2016), 42.

28 Guillaume Latzko-Toth, Claudine Bonneau, and Mélanie Millette, “Small Data, Thick Data: Thickening Strategies for Trace-Based Social Media Research,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase (London: SAGE, 2017), 204–12.

29 For example, #ถ้าพลวง, #หมู่ป่า, #13ชีวิตต้องรอด, #คนแปลกหน้าที้อยากเจอ, #Hooyah, etc.

other experts in documentation. In the interviews with the archivists, I aimed to understand the roles and duties of their work “recording events” in the NAT. Questions posed to the archivists also dealt with their work processes, opinions, and experiences as well as their thoughts about the future. The other two interviews were with experts who are highly experienced in the work of documentation in different ways. The first expert is a retired NAT archivist who worked for Thailand’s Royal Academy and, as the archivist in the event recording team at the National Archives of Thailand, was influential in designing the documentation patterns used there today. The second interviewee, who gave permission to reveal his identity, is Makut Onrudee, a national artist in literature. In his more than 40 years’ experience as an editor, he has developed a “diary method” that helps children discover themselves, express their identities, and develop their skills.<sup>30</sup>

While the documentary study aims to better understand the Thai methods of documentation that have become embedded in the culture, the interviews provide in-depth information about how the practice of documenting events is carried out today in the NAT by practitioners themselves and about how other experts gauge the outlook of Thai archives and their potential to develop in modern Thai society.

## Two Old Archives: Documenting the Past

Contrary to generally accepted Western archival practice, the main approach of Thai documentation is based on narrative, with events told through an *alak* (scribe); however, the archives also refer to records (i.e., the outcomes of activities) together with the narrative.

The selected archives discussed below, documenting times of crisis, are characteristic of Thai documentation in such times. Documentation in official settings historically followed some similar patterns but was quite loose; however, it was used for gathering information and functioned as a reference to records. As for private documentation, the example here was carried out by a highly educated person who had a role in gathering and documenting information in society.

30 See, for example, Makut Onrudee, “วรรณกรรมเด็กที่เด็กเขียน” [Kid Literature that Kids Wrote], *The Cloud*, 2017, accessed September 4, 2021, <https://readthecloud.co/butterfly-2/>.

### **Jotmai het Rattanakosin Era 112**

The Jotmai het Rattanakosin Era 112 contains the documentation of Phra Narong Wichit (Leuan Na Nakorn), a commander of the vanguard in the northeast of the country when France attacked Siam during the Franco-Siamese War (1893). The author documented daily operations around northeastern Siam from April 17 to August 20, 1893, to report to Prince Bijitprijakara, his commander, in the form of a diary, with 98 entries in total.

#### **Structure and Method**

Entries were recorded daily, usually starting with the date, and then giving an account of each activity, documented by time, and typically presented in chronological order. When applicable, the documentation named the commanders of missions ordered by Prince Bijitprijakara and Luang Thephen. Other relevant staff were also named in the documentation.

#### **Content**

The entries covered all activities relating to the military action, such as the movements of the troops, spying activities, negotiations with the French army, and battles. The content focused more often on fights and decisions made on the battlefield and much less on negotiations. This may be because Phra Narong Wichit's duties were more concerned with military operations. In a few cases, the author also noted the reasoning behind decisions or actions, especially if these differed from the original orders. This information is valuable since it gives details that might not appear in normal records, including details about weapons and numbers of soldiers.

#### **Use**

These archives were intended first for internal use – that is, to report to supervisors and to furnish bureaucratic evidence. In the long term, as the incident took on more historical significance, the archives came to be used for historical purposes. This piece of documentation gives detailed information on the circumstances and military operations, and it is valuable in understanding the history of the main incident, which occurred in Bangkok, from one primary “official” perspective.<sup>31</sup>

31 The most prominent incident in the Franco-Siamese crisis of 1893 was the blockade of French naval troops near



### **“Laem Wipayok”**

“Laem Wipayok” (Cape of Misery) is an article in a funeral book published in 1970. The author, Lieutenant Dr. Sanga Ramnarong, was a doctor living in Pak Phanang, Nakhon Si Thammarat Province. He witnessed the devastation wrought by the 1962 Tropical Storm Harriet when it made landfall at the village of Talumpuk. The storm at Talumpuk Cape, with a death toll of more than 1,000 people, was one of the biggest disasters in Thailand’s history. This jotmai het depicts what happened through the eyes of a doctor who treated many of the survivors, each of whom had a story about their survival of the disaster.

#### **Structure and Method**

The narrative was written after the incident, as a book chapter, and the author’s writing was derived from interviews with his patients and others who were directly involved in the disaster. Despite the familiar narrative approach, this document is unique because it is based on the collection of oral history. The narrative consists of three parts: (1) giving geographical background on Talumpuk; (2) describing the incidents on the day, in detail; and (3) documenting the author’s visit to Talumpuk a day after the incident, including the interviews with 18 of the survivors.

#### **Content**

The account was written in documentary form and related some small anecdotes, along with the emotions and opinions of the author – which was a trend in writing from that time period. The language used is straightforward but also contains some stylistic and entertaining elements such as examples and comparisons. The oral history contains real, diverse experiences and relates the emotions felt at the time. For example, one of the people who experienced the storm is quoted as saying,

The house was unstable and we were afraid it would fall. The frightening sound of the storm filled my heart. . . . My fear of the storm made me raise my hands above my head in prayer. I don’t know how many times and what vows I made but I

the mouth of the Chao Phraya River, which resulted in Siam ceding some land to France. The incidents that had preceded this consisted of fighting between the two countries in other parts of Siam.

raised my folded hands in the direction that the storm came from, the northeast. It blew for more than an hour.<sup>32</sup>

### Use

Funeral books, which are given as souvenirs to attendees of funerals in Thailand, are an important tool for the dissemination of knowledge in Thai culture.<sup>33</sup> The books can be on a wide range of topics, such as history, *dhamma*,<sup>34</sup> and many other types of specialized knowledge across different fields.

## Contemporary Documentation: The Tham Luang Cave Rescue

The data collection for this second phase of the research project consisted of analyzing Facebook posts on the rescue of the Wild Boars youth football team from the Tham Luang cave in Chiang Rai Province. The incident came about when 12 boys (aged 11–16) and their coach became trapped in the cave on June 23, 2018. Rescue teams from all over the country tried to locate the boys and their coach and help them get out. The main rescue team was the Naval Special Warfare Command, known as the Royal Thai Navy SEALs, and others with special skills (such as bird nest climbers from Trang Province in southern Thailand, for instance). Additional expert teams from countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States, and China also joined the mission.

The public kept an eye on the mission online by consulting news websites and social media daily. The page that was followed most closely (according to post

32 Sanga Ramnarong ส่าง รามณรงค์, "Laem Wipayok แหลมวิปโยค" [Cape of Misery], in *Anuson nai ngan phrarat-chathan ploeng sop Phanake Phra Ramnarong (Sangiam Ramnarong)* อนุสรณ์ในงานพระราชทานเพลิงศพ พันเอก พระรามณรงค์ (เสด็จม รามณรงค์) [Memorial in Royal Cremation Ceremony of Lieutenant Phra Ramnarong (Sangiam Ramnarong)] (Phra Nakorn: Rongrueang Tham Printing House, 1970), 35.

33 Publishing books and distributing them at funerals is a traditional practice in Thailand. These books, which can be on a wide array of subjects, are provided by the funeral hosts as keepsakes in memory of the deceased and have the added benefit of transmitting knowledge. Over time, these books become valuable sources of historical or other information. There is no official national repository of funeral books, but some libraries (e.g., Thammasat University Library, which is well known for its funeral books collection) have them in their special collections. Some funeral books have even been deemed especially important and have been added to rare books collections around the country.

34 *Dhamma*, or *dharma*, in Sanskrit, refers to Buddhist teaching.

likes and views) was a page called “Thai NavySEAL,”<sup>35</sup> the official Facebook page of the team in charge of the search and rescue operations. Comments suggested that this was because the page was seen as a reliable source of information. A total of 100 posts, from the beginning of the mission through its resolution and follow-up (i.e., June 25 to December 26, 2018) were collected and analyzed for comparison with the two historical documentation examples discussed above. The posts were categorized into three groups: those from the beginning of the mission in June, from the main mission in July, and from the post-rescue period.

### **“Thai NavySEAL” Posts: June**

The structure and method, content, and uses of posts from this period can be characterized as follows.

#### **Structure and Method**

In the initial days of the operation, the posts were concise. Each one started with the time, followed by a description of the operation, and usually included some attached photos. Like Jotmaihet Rattanakosin Era 112, the documentation followed a pattern of date, time, and action – a format that fit the needs of military use. A notable difference was the variety of record types attached to the Facebook posts, such as photos and video clips. These records were embedded in the posts – a practice that was not followed in the old archives, which referred only to other official records. In this early stage of the mission, the page administrator posted several times each day to give progress updates. As time progressed, the number of followers, likes, and shares increased significantly.

#### **Content**

The content of the posts in this phase consisted of reports about the operation. Videos and photos caught the attention of viewers because they showed evidence and allowed viewers to experience the mission. The discussion in the comments on the posts were particularly interesting. Comments mostly expressed encouragement, thanked those involved in the mission, and proposed potential solutions to various problems.

35 “Thai NavySEAL” Facebook page.

## Use

The main purpose of the posts was to communicate mission progress to the public, but other uses emerged, for example, brainstorming of potential solutions.

### **“Thai NavySEAL” Posts: July**

The structure and method, content, and uses of posts from this period can be characterized as follows.

#### **Structure and Method**

As the operation continued in July, posts were increasingly likely to contain more varied kinds of records, such as handwritten documents, videos, and official records – all of which usually increased the impact of the posts. For example, the video that showed English divers finding the Wild Boars team alive was shared very widely and liked worldwide (785,000 likes, 28 million views, 89,000 comments).<sup>36</sup> Technology also allowed followers to have exclusive experiences, such as viewing video of an interview with one of the Wild Boars inside the cave. The boys’ written notes and their photos enabled followers to be close to the event even while it was unfolding. A significant occasion – when Saman Kunan, one of the rescue volunteers and a former Thai Navy SEAL, passed away from asphyxiation – inspired a flood of memorial posts. Music composed in his memory, photos from his funeral, and tributes (expressing gratitude and condolences, for example) all made the documentation deeply emotional and participatory. However, the short, concise structure of the posts themselves was still a main feature of the page, again showing a military reporting style.

#### **Content**

The posts in this group covered the main operations of the mission. They first provided very detailed information on the search for the Wild Boars. After the team was discovered, the content of the posts focused mainly on the survivors. Some parts of operations were reported, but almost all reports stuck to the successful results of the operations. The mission had to be done quickly and in secret, with many procedural details revealed after the mission was complete.

36 “Thai NavySEAL” Foundation, “Hooyah ..... ทีมหมูป่า,” Facebook Watch, July 3, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1631228493667210>.

Unlike comments on the earlier posts in June, those in July typically did not make suggestions; instead, they were more empathetic, expressing encouragement, gratitude, gladness, and sorrow for the death of Saman Kunan, who was posthumously promoted to the rank of lieutenant commander. Some creative art (such as cartoons, poems, and music) was also posted – only occasionally by the page administrator but frequently by followers themselves in comments, for the purpose of encouragement.

### **Use**

The posts functioned as communication tools at the beginning of the incident, but they also allowed people to experience the incidents very closely and publicly express their reactions to the content almost instantly – marking a relatively new development in the way some people experience historically significant events. Some posts also requested assistance, such as donations or volunteers. The communal, collaborative nature of these posts reflects several traditional Thai values, such as benevolence, admiration of heroic individuals, solidarity, and faith in Buddhism and the monarchy; moreover, many comments on the posts themselves consistently expressed these values. Many were also directed to a society larger than just Thailand or just the rescuers, making it clear that the gratitude and solidarity from these posts and comments were meant not only for the Thai Navy SEALs but also for all who contributed to the efforts in any manner, regardless of their nationality or race.

### **“Thai NavySEAL” Posts: Post-Rescue**

The structure and method, content, and uses of posts from this period can be characterized as follows.

#### **Structure and Method**

The “Thai NavySEAL” page continued to post about the Wild Boars until the end of 2018, adding 17 posts during this phase. Some posts documented things that had not previously been disclosed publicly. Others did not directly document the incident but contained related information from other sources, such as articles and events related to the Wild Boars cave rescue.

### Content

The posts included reflection on the mission, dissemination of additional details, and information related to the heightened reputation of the SEALs as a result of the mission.

### Use

The page functioned at this stage as a knowledge management space that shared lessons learned with the public and worked as a public relations vehicle for initiatives such as fundraising events in support of Lieutenant Saman Kunan's family.

## Comparison between Traditional and New Forms of Documentation

Studying these old and new examples of crisis documentation highlights some similarities and differences. The structure of the old archives varies according to their contexts (i.e., reports for military use and a funeral book to commemorate a private individual) and consists of static, textual, printed formats. These archives were written as evidence and as historical records. The structure of the documentation of the Wild Boars rescue on Facebook shared some similarity to that of Jotmaihet Rattanakosin Era 112 in terms of its reporting pattern (i.e., date, time, and actions). However, the new platform allowed the attachment of more materials, such as photos and video clips, as additional evidence. This can be seen as a development of the old method, which tends to be criticized for its subjective nature. The evidence attached to the new records, however, helps corroborate the reliability of the documentation.

Another difference between the old and the new ways of documenting is the interactive, reciprocal nature of online posts, which is similar to the nature of some digital archives.<sup>37</sup> This differs from printed documentation resulting from interviews, because it involves a more collaborative approach that invites participation from a much broader cross-section of stakeholders. The online social media platform enables people to participate almost in real time, allowing for two-way

<sup>37</sup> Frans Smit, Arnoud Glaudemans, and Rienk Jonker, *Archives in Liquid Times* (Den Haag: Stichting Archiefpublicaties, 2017), <http://www.oopen.org/search?identifier=641001>.

communication and a more engaging type of documentation. However, this method also presents challenges to Thai Internet users. Many people following the “Thai NavySEAL” page were also accessing documentation (e.g., news, analyses, etc.) about the cave rescue from many other sources, and many commenters would share this additional documentation. As noted above, the comments section on “Thai NavySEAL” posts typically contained many shared photos or creative artworks. Some of this additional content had no clear provenance. This might be acceptable for some artistic content, but it can be problematic if the purpose of sharing the content is to give information. While the “Thai NavySEAL” page itself posted correct information that combatted inaccurate news reports, the unidentified provenance of the participatory content sometimes led to problems of reliability and accuracy of information.

The differing formats of the old and new documentation also make for huge differences in archival work. For appraisal, the large volume of social media data poses some questions for archivists: First, is the data even considered archival? If so, what criteria should archivists employ to select reliable archives? Is it better to collect everything using technological tools? If this is the case, how should archivists initiate this new collection process? As for preservation, the nature of more fragile digital objects requires a more proactive preservation strategy. Archivists may not be able to continue handling archival tasks by themselves, as they have been accustomed to doing.

The essence of the content in the old and new documentation of crises is not very different; the documentation in each case communicates loss or damage as well as actions to overcome challenges. What does differ is the style of communication. The content in “Laem Wipayok” was written with literary techniques such as simile and long, detailed descriptions; and the book also used long narratives and interviews to document history – all of which aim to educate readers and sometimes to impart moral lessons. The documentation on Facebook, on the other hand, does not employ such literary techniques. The posts that got the most engagement were those with videos and photos. The language used during the crisis was concise, while a more informal style was adopted to interact with followers after the mission was complete.

The main function of both the old and the new documentation examples was to communicate with stakeholders, but each had different aims in doing so. The military report of Jotmaihet Rattanakosin 112 was created as evidence of operations and to communicate with commanding officers, while “Laem Wipayok”

was created with the intention of providing documentation of a historical incident. On the other hand, the more recent example of documentation via social media was a Thai Navy SEALs public relations operation that became an open documentation space enabling wide public participation, whether through comments, content sharing, or the various “reactions” (e.g., “like,” “love,” and “sad” emojis) available on the Facebook platform. This new style of documentation shares some similarities with that found in old sources (in addition to those mentioned here) but is much more engaging because of its participatory, communal nature and its ability to attract people with audiovisual materials. In other words, this new documentation was able to connect to secondary users much more quickly than the old documentation. This all indicates that the public relations space of social media works very well as archives in the sense of a Thai-style “hall of fame,” and it has potential to be very participatory as well. Nonetheless, the problems of reliability, accuracy, and sustainability for users do raise a new set of challenges for archival professionals today.

## Insights from Archivists and Experts

Data collection also included in-depth interviews with three archivists on the event documentation team at the NAT at the time of this research and two other documentation experts.

### The Traditional Practice at the National Archives

The archivists in the “recording events” team at the NAT, and the documentation expert who previously worked for the NAT, discussed the origin of the team and explained that its main duty was to collect news clippings. A second duty was to attend and document events, then publish this documentation as articles in the journal of the Fine Arts Department.<sup>38</sup> The format of today’s work has changed somewhat, with both duties – that is, (1) documentation of significant events, whereby archivists attend and document events as they take place, and (2) documentation of daily life, called *jotmai het prathet thai* (archives of Thailand) – being conducted on a larger scale and resulting in books chronicling notable daily events.

38 Expert A, interview with the author, December 16, 2019.



The process for documentation of significant events involves the following steps:

### **1. Undertaking Preliminary Research**

In this step, archivists study background information and gather related documents before embarking on fieldwork. This step is where copies of records are gathered; one interviewee described it as an effective way to archive information proactively.

### **2. Making an Outline**

Archivists develop a flexible outline for the book according to the structure set by the event committee. They arrange documents and proceed in their work based on this book outline.

### **3. Conducting Fieldwork**

The work at this stage involves attending the event, writing observations, and taking photos. This is usually done by a pair of archivists working together. The success of the fieldwork requires the archivists to build relationships and trust with the event host and organizers. One archivist also emphasized the importance of good individual physical and mental preparation before going on a fieldwork assignment.<sup>39</sup>

### **4. Producing the Book**

Accuracy is strictly emphasized at this stage, during which the resulting book will be edited three or four times by senior editors and given a title that identifies the particular event. Nevertheless, if the archivists are unsure about any detail, they will contact the event organizers to check accuracy.

## **Principles and Concerns of Thai Traditional Practice**

The national archivists highlighted the dedication that this work requires of the staff. As for the writing itself, the interviewees noted that accuracy of information is of paramount importance. When there are different versions from multiple archivists, these will have to be compared, and the accuracy of the account is verified by discussing it with the host or consulting other sources. A

<sup>39</sup> Archivist C, interview with the author, November 19, 2019.

second important principle is impartiality.<sup>40</sup> The archivists are expected only to report, not to give any opinions, which is perhaps influenced by Western archival principles.<sup>41</sup> The third guiding principle is discretion, which is a product of Thai values. If the information could be detrimental to anyone, the archivists may agree to omit it.<sup>42</sup> The archivists' secondary job, *jotmai het prathet thai*, shares the same writing principles.<sup>43</sup>

Apart from an ongoing debate about the reliability of the traditional Thai documentation method, the archivists addressed challenges they face in their work. Lack of resources is one significant obstacle. Funds are allocated to their annual budget based on the number of books they plan to publish. Hence, the documentation has book production as a frame for management. Even more pressing is a lack of human resources; the relatively few archivists and staff are simply not able to document all of the country's significant events. Administrators sometimes specifically request that archivists document certain events, which the latter had not been planning to include, thereby adding to their workload. In some cases, archivists enlist the help of volunteers for some tasks; for instance, volunteer photographers have taken part in documenting especially large events, such as the royal funeral of King Rama IX.<sup>44</sup> Some archivists also expressed a wish that more government departments had a better understanding of documentation and could document their own events. On the other hand, interviewees did seem to be concerned about losing their identities as national archivists. If volunteers or participatory models became more widely used, the archivists themselves would have to take on additional roles as trainers and educators.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Archivist A, interview, October 10, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> For example, one of the principles in the SAA code of ethics refers to "judgment." Please see Society of American Archivists, "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," SAA, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>. The rule against bias in archival description is outlined in Margaret Procter and Michael Cook, *Manual of Archival Description*, 3rd ed. (Milton Park, UK: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> Expert A, interview, December 16, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Archivist B, interview, November 29, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Archivist B, interview, November 29, 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Archivist B, interview, November 29, 2019; Archivist C, interview, November 19, 2019.

The archivists base their work chiefly on experience and improvisation, and there is a shortage of standards or clear delineation of responsibilities to go along with the deep experience they have accumulated. For example, the archivists appeared to be unsure of what their overarching responsibilities were (e.g., documenting the present or the past). In addition to noting a desire to benefit from more concrete standards and policy guidance, they expressed an interest in developing their professional practice and embracing more diverse ways of archiving, such as through oral history, preservation of digital materials, and so on.<sup>46</sup>

### **Outside the Archives: Makut Onrudee's Diary Method**

National Artist in Literature Makut Onrudee, who is also an experienced editor and publisher, has developed a writing method that helps children discover their identities and allows aging people to document their experiences and observations. Onrudee has worked for decades to encourage activities that lead to a knowledge-based society, and he believes that reading is the key to achieving this. He noted that the popular statement that reading starts from home is not applicable in Thai society, where most families do not nurture a reading culture. Many obstacles may get in the way of Thai parents encouraging their children to read. For example, they may lack time, resources, literacy, or an interest in reading. However, Onrudee has found that writing can be a successful alternative.<sup>47</sup>

He encourages children aged 6–15 to write, draw, or otherwise make use of blank notebooks. He does not tell the children what to do, but he argues that when they want to communicate, they will manage to find books and other references they may need to conceive their own work. Twelve of these young writers have gone on to win national-level awards – a strong indication of the method's effectiveness in Thai society. Onrudee pointed out that this method is different from the teaching method typically observed in Thai schools, where students are told what to do. His method instead allows freedom and room for creativity, which helps his writers pursue their own preferred types of expression (e.g., prose, poetry, illustration, etc.). Additionally, he has used the same method with elderly people – a group with much potential for documenting their past – which he has described as “history that furnishes historical evidence in a

<sup>46</sup> Archivist B, interview, November 29, 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Makut Onrudee, interview with the author, Bangkok, November 18, 2019.

bottom-up approach.”<sup>48</sup> Onrudee explains that the memories and experiences of elders, a growing population in Thailand’s aging society, can be documented this way to help preserve contemporary history. This would help fill a gap in Thailand, which tends as a country to preserve archaeologically valuable objects but to neglect more recent history from the public’s perspective.

Because of Onrudee’s role at Butterfly Books, the publishing house he co-founded, this documentation tends to be processed into books, just like at the NAT. The trails Onrudee has pioneered can act as possible starting points for the gathering and maintenance of collective memories, but for long-term preservation and accessibility, a suitable archival system will be needed.

## Discussion

Thai documentation has been influenced many times throughout history by external factors, such as Chinese documentation through early diplomatic relations, standard recordkeeping practices from the West in the 19th and 20th centuries, and digital transformations today. It has received these influences unequally, which corresponds with Appadurai’s hypothesis regarding ruptures in globalization.<sup>49</sup> In all old and new documentation, we see localization of these influencing practices, with Thai archival practice adopting what has been deemed compatible with Thai values and behaviours. Although the country has had some mixed success in applying recordkeeping paradigms from the West, it still seems to need an archival paradigm that allows narrative, history, and emotions within the archival space.

Regarding the practice of documentation in formal Thai institutions and social media, there has not been a significant shift in the function of Thai archives, which continue to be popularly conceived as memorials or halls of fame. Rather than disrupting this approach, digital platforms have expanded the opportunities available to people for documenting and disseminating news and reputation-building content. In this way, social media is a new, more engaging space for Thai archives. The content shared in this medium – whether concerning the past or the present – shows many customary Thai values such as benevolence,

<sup>48</sup> Onrudee, interview, November 18, 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*.

solidarity, admiration of heroes, and so on. The additional content today (in particular, comments on social media posts) seems to be of a type that was never previously documented.

Despite its strength in making documentation more accessible, documentation via social media still has issues of reliability. This is where archivists need to play a role: by helping people document with accuracy and by providing them with authentic and reliable sources. In Thailand, the traditional emphasis on accuracy and propriety in the cultural sphere will have a significant role in helping people access information they can trust in the complex digital world.

One issue archivists face in archiving social media content is that of ownership. Information stored on online platforms can have multiple avenues of provenance; moreover, some social media platforms claim ownership over information posted on their platforms. There has been a trend of archivists around the world attempting to archive social media content, but the sustainability of this trend remains uncertain.

Some archival platforms themselves offer participatory archives approaches, which open up space for non-professionals to share information. National archives of many countries have done this. For example, the Citizen Archivist Project of the National Archives of Singapore<sup>50</sup> received broad participation from citizens (especially elderly citizens) who were interested in sharing their memories, and it has been able to help record more recent history. More recently, the Documenting COVID-19 project of the National Library Board of Singapore allows people to document their experiences during the pandemic,<sup>51</sup> while information institutions provide instruction on archiving.<sup>52</sup> Some initiatives have been launched in Thailand, too, such as the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre's COVID-19 digital archive project, which accepts COVID-19-related stories from the public, who can upload their documents and write about their experiences of the COVID-19 situation.<sup>53</sup>

50 National Archives of Singapore, "The Citizen Archivist Project," National Archives of Singapore, accessed December 5, 2021, <https://www.nas.gov.sg/CitizenArchivist/>.

51 Government of Singapore, "Documenting COVID-19 in Singapore," National Library Board Singapore, July 4, 2021, <https://www.nlb.gov.sg/GetInvolved/Contribute/Create/DocumentingCOVID-19.aspx>.

52 Government of Singapore, "Documenting COVID-19 in Singapore."

53 Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, accessed June 29, 2021, <https://www.sac.or.th/portal/>.

User-generated content that may support archival work can be created on these archival institutions' own sites; however, there is not yet an established participatory approach to creating Thai-style documentation for archival purposes. Nevertheless, the changing format of materials now allows for both innovation and a return to a more traditional archival perspective. In this regard, the lens of the *alak*, or traditional scribe, is one that archivists and others could adopt even more in the digital age. That is, archivists and others would take on the duty of recording contemporary society and significant events themselves, as they occur. The main difference now would be that this duty would not rest only with professional archivists but would be open to everyone. There are also questions of sustainability, in terms of preserving digital materials as well as providing trusted space. These roles could be added to today's archivists' traditional roles in documenting events, educating others about archival science, and providing trusted repositories for social memories.

## Conclusion: The Future of Traditional Archives

As the qualitative analysis of the examples investigated in this article show, Thai documentation practices have evolved in many ways as the prevailing format of archival records has changed from paper to digital media. Digital platforms have sometimes brought a less formal communication style, have proven to be more accessible and engaging to the public, and have accommodated the inclusion of additional evidence (e.g., photos and videos) to the documentation, which improves on a clear incapacity within the old documentation method. Nevertheless, similar sets of values are seen across all the documentation examples – old and new – and despite the changes, documentation on social media still corresponds with the familiar function of Thai archives as a hall of fame. At the same time, social media content can include unreliable information, which suggests that Thai citizens could document better if they were provided with archival guidance for ensuring trustworthy facts.

Digital transformation of the documentation space in Thailand represents a momentous shift, but it also presents a noteworthy opportunity for the continuity and adaptation of traditional Thai documentation practices. This suggests a number of potential lessons for the NAT: First, *Make things accessible*. The NAT could accomplish this largely by providing its work online, instead of in the

form of books. An online exhibition would function as a reliable source, and making materials available online would allow more people to easily search for the materials they seek. Second, *Provide clear strategies for Thai documentation*. Today, traditional documentation is carried out based on in-house training. It is necessary to address this at the policy level in all areas of archival work, for example, by establishing criteria regarding what the NAT should document as well as standards for preservation and access – particularly for the digital environment. This also requires archivists to take on the role of educating the public about the creation and management of archives. Third, *Recognize participatory archives as a potential growth area*. The interviews with archivists suggested that finding volunteers and networking will help archivists in handling their great amount of work. The NAT should train people in documentation practices and build a network of volunteers who can help archivists actively preserve information. Moreover, if the NAT were to decide to embrace public documentation, such as via social media, it could provide the necessary archival knowledge to help participants document constructively, for example, by documenting contemporary history as it happens. Finally, *Encourage documentation as culture*. Makut Onrudee has shown that building communities around writing and documentation can be successful in Thailand. There should be support for such activities in various communities, such as schools, temples, or online groups – not only for the sake of the documentation itself but also for the personal development of participants.

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**BIOGRAPHY** Naya Sucha-xaya is an archives educator in the Faculty of Arts, at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Thailand, and a researcher in the Arc of Memory Research Unit in the same Faculty. She received her PhD in information studies (archive studies) from University College London. Through her studies and work, she has observed that Western archival practices are often applied in a limited fashion when they are brought into a Thai setting; this is due to many factors, including cultural differences. Much of her research thus focuses on understanding the cultural heritage of original Thai documentation practices and how these can be applied to contemporary Thai contexts in the midst of the changing digital environment.