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Cooking rice, Re-discovering design

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We explore the relationship between design and everyday life by considering stories about the electronic rice cooker. Since its invention in Japan in the 1950s, the electronic rice cooker has changed the way the majority of Thai people cook rice. With the arrival of the new generation of computerized rice cookers, the onward march of technology seems inexorable.

Seen in this way, technological histories appear linear and unproblematic. However, seen from the perspective of everyday life a different set of questions, issues and problems arise. What do people really think about electronic rice cookers? What do they see when they look at their rice cookers or those of others¹? What will become of the electronic rice cooker now that digital ones are available? What has happened to traditional methods and skills? All these lead us to a bigger question: what changes did the electronic rice cooker really bring to our lives?

Fifty-five Thais told us stories about their rice cookers; stories about love, loss, friendships, remembering and bereavement. Listened to carefully, their stories disclose meanings and voices about design and social practices that happen in everyday life but are rarely heard or attended to; voices and stories that may, otherwise, be lost forever.

The rice cooker is a mundane object, but precisely because of that, it might throw light upon the complex inter-relations between design and people in the ordinary everyday. The electronic rice cooker did not simply replace traditional methods and displace traditional artefacts; it became part of the fabric of our lives and wove itself into our personal narratives. For designers and design educators alike, is there a better point at which to consider how best to reset design?

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