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# Why Is Huffington Post Running A Multi-Part Series To Promote The Lies Of A Guy Who Pretended To Invent Email?

from the *that's-just-wrong* dept

Email  
 by Mike Masnick  
 Tue, Sep 2nd 2014  
 12:26pm

Filed Under:  
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I thought this story had ended a few years ago. Back in 2012, we wrote about how The Washington Post and some other big name media outlets were claiming that a guy named V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai had "invented email" in 1978. The problem was that it **wasn't even close to true** and relied on a number of total misconceptions about email, software and copyright law. Ayyadurai and some of his friends have continued to play up the claim that he "invented" email, but it simply was never true, and it's reaching a level that seems truly bizarre. Ayyadurai may have done some interesting things, but his continued false insistence that he invented email is reaching really questionable levels. And, now it's gone absolutely nutty, with the Huffington Post running a **multi-part series** (up to **five** separate articles so far -- all done in the past 10 days) all playing up misleading claims saying that Ayyadurai invented email, even though even a basic understanding of the history shows he did not.

Let's take care of the basics first, and then we'll dig in on what's going on here, because it's really quite ridiculous. First off, no one denies that V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai -- an apparently very bright 14-year-old at the time -- wrote an email software program for the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ) in 1978. By all accounts, it was a perfectly decent email system that allowed the UMDNJ staff to send electronic messages. Further, no one doubts that, in 1981, Ayyadurai registered the copyright on his program, which was called EMAIL. The problems are that (1) email was invented long before 1978, (2) the copyright is merely on the specific software code, not the idea of email, and (3) while Ayyadurai may have independently recreated the basics of email (and even added a nice feature), none of his work was even remotely related to what later became the standards of email. What's most sickening about this is that as part of this new PR campaign, Ayyadurai is ridiculously arguing that the reason no one believes him isn't because he's simply wrong, but because they can't stand to believe that "a dark-skinned immigrant kid, 14 years old," invented email, and that it was done in "one of the poorest cities in the US" rather than at a famous university.

Again, that might make for a nice story line if there were some factual basis behind it, but there isn't. The history of email is **well-documented** from **multiple sources** and it began way, way before 1978. And while early versions were somewhat crude, by 1978 they had basically everything that Ayyadurai claims to have invented (it is entirely believable that Ayyadurai, as a bright kid, independently came up with the same ideas, but he was hardly the first). There was a messaging system called MAILBOX at MIT in 1965. You can read **all the details of it here**, including source code. Ray Tomlinson is frequently credited with inventing the modern concept of email for the internet by establishing the @ symbol (in 1972) as a way of determining both the user **and** which computer to send the email to. By 1975, there were things like email folders (invented by Larry Roberts) and some other basic email apps. As is noted, by 1976 -- two years before Ayyadurai wrote his app -- email was **75% of all ARPANET traffic**.

So, let's get to the Huffington Post trying to whitewash all of this factual history out of existence.

It started on August 20th, with an article by Larry Weber, CEO of Racepoint Global, kicking off a supposed "series" called "The History of Email." Except that the series has little to do with the history of email at all. It's just about Ayyadurai writing his particular email program in 1978. Great story. Smart kid done good. Has nothing to do with the invention of email. Weber, though, calls it **The Boy Who Invented Email**. At this point, it should be worth questioning why Weber suddenly decided this was such an interesting story. If you don't know, Weber is one of PR's **biggest names**, having built one of the most successful PR companies in history. It seems odd that he "just happened" to come across Ayyadurai's fake story and decided to help create a 5-part series about it. I have reached out to both Weber and the Huffington Post to ask if Weber has any financial relationship with Ayyadurai. As I publish this, neither has responded. The post will be updated if I

It started on August 24th, with an article by Larry Weber, CEO of Hatterbox Global, kicking off a supposed "series" called "The History of Email." Except that the series has little to do with the history of email at all. It's just about Ayyadurai writing his particular email program in 1978. Great story. Smart kid done good. Has nothing to do with the invention of email. Weber, though, calls it **The Boy Who Invented Email**. At this point, it should be worth questioning why Weber suddenly decided this was such an interesting story. If you don't know, Weber is one of PR's **biggest names**, having built one of the most successful PR companies in history. It seems odd that he "just happened" to come across Ayyadurai's fake story and decided to help create a 5-part series about it. I have reached out to both Weber and the Huffington Post to ask if Weber has any financial relationship with Ayyadurai. As I publish this, neither has responded. The post will be updated if I hear from either. None of the posts in the series disclose any such relationship. Nor does the Huffington Post indicate that this is a "sponsored" post as far as I can tell.

The **second** and **third** articles in the series are both written by Leslie Michelson, the Director of High Performance and Research Computing at Rutgers Medical School (which took over UMDNJ a while back). More importantly, in 1978 he was the Director of the Laboratory Computer Network at UMDNJ, and apparently "challenged" Ayyadurai to create an electronic interoffice mail system. The **fourth** article in the series is by Robert Field, a technologist at Rutgers Medical School and, in 1978, a colleague of Ayyadurai at UMDNJ. See a pattern? Huffington Post also interviewed **Ayyadurai** for HuffPost Live in which he mostly attacks anyone who challenges his story, comparing himself to Philo T. Farnsworth -- except in that case, Farnsworth *actually invented TV* before anyone else. Ayyadurai did not do that with email. Apparently there are two more in this series that are still to come.

When you look at the collection of articles, they all repeat the same basic things: Ayyadurai did create an email system and "it was recognized by the federal government." This is misleading in the extreme. It's amusing how they all use the exact same language. Larry Weber claims:

*On August 30, 1982, the US government officially recognized V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai as the inventor of email by awarding him the first US Copyright for "Email," "Computer Program for Electronic Mail System," for his 1978 invention. This was awarded at a time when Copyright was the only way to protect software inventions.*

Leslie Michaelson says:

*On August 30, 1982, V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai received official recognition as the inventor of email from the U.S. government, for the work he had done in 1978.*

Every article in the series includes this image of his copyright registration:

**CERTIFICATE OF COPYRIGHT REGISTRATION**  
 UNITED STATES COPYRIGHT OFFICE  
 FORM TX  
 REGISTRATION NUMBER: TXu 111-775  
 REGISTER OF COPYRIGHTS  
 United States of America  
 TITLE OF THIS WORK: 1 EMAIL  
 AUTHOR: 2 a ME SHIVA AYYADURAI  
 DATE OF REGISTRATION: 8 30 82  
 NATURE OF AUTHORSHIP: Created and Wrote entire text of the computer program.

Except, if you know anything about copyright, you know that what they're claiming is not at all true. The registration of copyrights is about as close to a rubber-stamping process as is possible. It has nothing to do with "inventions" at all, but is rather a copyright for the *specific software program*. Ayyadurai received a copyright on *his email program* and that's it. It has absolutely nothing to do with him being the inventor of email.

Microsoft holds a copyright on Windows, but no one claims it "invented" the glass things you look outside your building with. Hell, no one even claims that Microsoft invented windowing user interfaces, because it did not. The name of the program and the fact that you can copyright it does not make you the "inventor" of the concept behind it.

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http://m.theregister.co.uk/2016/12/08/winter\_is\_c... time for the touches and pitchforks, I think.  
 Dark Helmet: Touches and pitchforks is my new favorite typo win  
 Jeffrey Nonken: hah. Well, mobile interface. That's my excuse.  
 Vidiot: WaPo article on copyright fight gets it wrong, of course... ASCAP and MPAAs seen as the Office's only constituents. How about us citizens instead?  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/12/09/congressional-panel-calls-for-independent-copyright-office>  
 Mike Masnick: well, they do quote new head of the ALA too, and he's good

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Weber, Ayyadurai and his friends try to counter the "it's a copyright, not a patent" claim with an incredibly misleading response. Here's Michelson:

*On August 30, 1982, Shiva was issued the first Copyright for "Email", "Computer Program for Electronic Mail System." At that time, Copyright was the equivalent of a patent, as there was no other way to protect software inventions. Only in 1980 was the Copyright Act of 1976 amended to protect software. Patent law had not even caught up to software in 1980*

Copyright was not, and has never been "the equivalent of a patent." Copyright and patents are two very different things. Copyright protects specific expression. Patents protect inventions. That's why copyright protected *only* the specific code that Ayyadurai wrote, rather than the concept of email. While it's true that software wasn't considered patentable by many at the time, that doesn't, in any way, mean that a copyright on a particular piece of software was the equivalent in any way, to a patent at the time.

To further their argument, both Weber and Michelson include nearly identical, but slightly different, infographics on the history of email, which (of course) start in 1978 with Ayyadurai's work. According to those charts, email was barely even a thing outside of UMDNJ until 1985 when offline email readers come about. The infographic is the work of the impressive sounding International Center for Integrative Systems. What's left out is that the "**Founder and Chairman**" of the International Center for Integrative Systems happens to be... a guy named V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai. The same infographic tosses in a "milestone" in email in 1995, when "Echomail" launched. Doesn't sound familiar? Echomail was a company started by... V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai.

The rest of the articles seem to just focus on attacking those who *actually* were involved in the invention of email and who dared to speak out against Ayyadurai's claims. The story, which includes no actual support, is that the folks at BBN decided in the early 80s that email security was a big business opportunity and rewrote history. Whether or not BBN played up their role in the history of email is debatable, but none of that changes the fact that they (and many others) were using email, and had email software, long before Ayyadurai did anything. At no point do any of them address the long history of email systems long before Ayyadurai arrived on the scene. Instead, they just talk about this grand conspiracy theory, claiming (ridiculously) that if BBN were outed as not being the inventor of email (even though no one really claims the company was the inventor of email) it would harm its business. That makes no sense at all. First of all, BBN's history of work related to the internet is long and well-detailed (there's even a **fantastic book** about it). Even if it had nothing to do with email, it's other work is much more impressive. Second, the company is currently owned by defense contracting giant Raytheon. Does anyone honestly think Raytheon cares one way or the other who "invented email"?

All of their "debunking" claims rest entirely on a RAND report written by David Crocker in 1977, where they take two sentences totally out of context. Here's what Ayyadurai, Weber and their friends claim Crocker said:

*"At this time, no attempt is being made to emulate a full-scale, inter-organizational mail system. The fact that the system is intended for use in various organizational contexts and by users of differing expertise makes it almost impossible to build a system which responds to all users' needs."*

It's telling that Ayyadurai and his friends never actually tell you the name of the report or link to it. Because actually reading what Crocker wrote would undermine their argument. The report is called "Framework and Functions of the 'MS' Personal Message System" and you can [read it here](#). Not only do Ayyadurai and his friends take Crocker entirely out of context, the two sentences above are not even contiguous sentences. *They're not even on the same page*. The first sentence is on page 18 of the paper. And it just says that *this particular* implementation (the program called MS) is focused on certain facets, and *for MS* "no attempt is being made to emulate a full-scale inter-organization mail system" even though the entire point of the paper is how various email implementations are clearly replicating inter-organizational mail systems. The second sentence comes on page 21 (with lots in between) and just focuses on the fact that lots of users have very different requests and desires, and it's impossible to satisfy everyone -- and that it, alone, is beyond the scope of this project. He's not, as Ayyadurai implies, claiming that building an

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- 03:25 More Prosecutors Refuse To Accept Guilty Pleas Based On Faulty S2 Field Drug Tests (11)

## Sunday

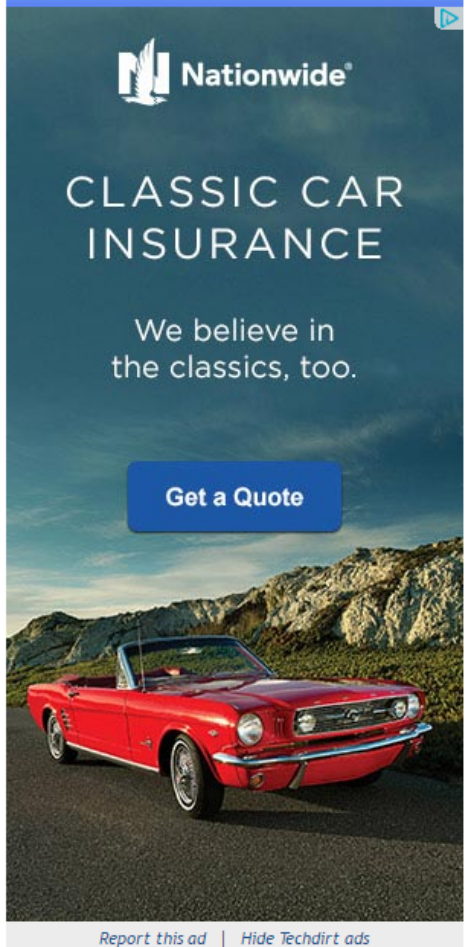
- 12:00 Funniest/Most Insightful Comments Of The Week At Techdirt (5)

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- 12:00 This Week In Techdirt History: SOPA, China, Dajazl & The Hypocrisy Of Copyright (2)

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*To construct a fully-detailed and monolithic message processing environment requires a much larger effort than has been possible with MS. In addition, the fact that the system is intended for use in various organizational contexts and by users of differing expertise makes it almost impossible to build a system which responds to all users' needs. Consequently, important segments of a full message environment have received little or no attention and decisions have been made with the expectation that other Unix capabilities will be used to augment MS. For example, MS has fairly primitive data-base management (filing and cataloging) facilities and message folders have been implemented in a way which allows them to be modified by programs, such as text editors, which access them directly, rather than through the message system.*

From the actual source documents (which, again, Ayyadurai and his friends fail to link to and totally misrepresent), it's clear that all Crocker is saying is that no single system will satisfy everyone's current interests. He's not saying it's impossible to create an interoffice email system. He's just saying that lots of different people have lots of different needs for an interoffice email system, and for the team building MS, it would be too difficult to satisfy everyone's exact requests, so they're focusing on certain features, knowing others will add other components later. And, given that people are still working to improve upon email today, it seems that's *still* basically true.

Back to the rest of the paper, which actually does a tremendous job undermining basically all of Ayyadurai's claims (again, which suggests why no one names or links to the full paper) -- in the very first paragraph (again, this is prior to Ayyadurai doing anything) it talks about research for "computer software" for "electronic mail." Ooops. It goes on:

*This report describes the design of one such program--the "MS" message system. Early electronic mail systems have existed on the larger computers. MS incorporates and expands upon many of the functions and concepts of such systems within an integrated package...*

In other words, the very paper that Ayyadurai and his friends insist prove that there was no email prior to 1978 talks in depth about a variety of email programs. Again, remember that this was written in 1977. This is not historical revisionism. It goes on:

*One of the earliest and most popular applications of the ARPANET computer communications network has been the transfer of text messages between people using different computers. This "electronic mail" capability was originally grafted onto existing informal facilities; however, they proved inadequate. A large network greatly expands the base of potential communicators; when coupled with the communication convenience of a message system, there results a considerable expansion to the list of features desired by users. Systems which have responded to these increased user needs have resided on medium- and large-scaled computers.*

In other words, lots of folks are working on email systems. Ayyadurai tries to brush all those aside by saying that his actually included things like "folders." But again, Crocker's paper notes:

*Messages reside in file "folders" and may contain any number of fields, or "components."*

It actually has a whole section on folders. It also shows some sample messages at the time, showing "to," "from," "cc," "subject," and "message" fields, showing that the very basics of interoffice mail (such as "cc" -- standing for carbon copy, which was a standard bit of interoffice mail) had already moved into email. Here's a screenshot (which you can click for a larger version):



```
MSB - version of 1 April 1978
This is a memo of my messages
<- Headers All messages
1 23 OCT To: Devices Topic detection (iteration)
.....
4 27 OCT Returnway Analogies
```



"components."

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Ayyadurai has built up his entire reputation around the (entirely false) claim that he "invented" email. His bio, his Twitter feed and his website all position himself as having invented email. He didn't. It looks like he wrote an implementation of an email system in 1978, long after others were working on similar things. He may have added some nice features, including the "blind carbon copy/bcc" concept (Update: Nope, bcc was in a 1977 RFC). He also appears to have potentially been ahead of others in making a full address book be a part of the email system. He may, in fact, be the first person who shortened "electronic mail" to "email" which is cool enough, and he'd have an interesting claim if that's all he claimed. Unfortunately, he's claiming much, much more than that. He's set up an entire website in which he accuses lots of folks, including Techdirt, of unfairly "attacking" him. He apparently believes that some of the attacks on him are because he spoke out against corruption in India. Or because people think only rich white people can invent stuff. None of that is accurate. There's a simple fact, and it's that Ayyadurai did not invent email.

He does not even attempt to counter any of the actual facts. The documents that are presented are misleading or out of context. He misrepresents what a copyright registration means. And his main "smoking gun," in support of his claim that people are trying to unfairly write him out of history, is presented in a misleading way, out of context, with two entirely separate sentences pushed together to pretend they say something they didn't.

He's clearly quite proud of the email software he wrote in 1978, and that's great. He should be. It may have made some incremental improvements on what else was already out there, but it is not inventing email. It's also entirely possible that he was wholly unaware of everything else that was out there. And, again, that's great. We've talked many times in the past about multiple people coming up with the same ideas around the same time. Ayyadurai should be quite proud of what he's done. But he's simply not telling the truth when he claims to have invented email. His website is full of accolades from the past, including his Westinghouse award (which is a prestigious award for high schoolers), his copyrights and his later patents. There are local newspaper clippings. That's all great. It reminds me of the folder my mother has on all the nice things that happened to me as a kid. But none of it means he invented email.

It's unclear why Huffington Post is publishing this ludicrous and disproven narrative. It's unclear why one of the biggest names in PR is involved in all of this, though you can take some guesses. But there are facts, and they include that "electronic mail" existed long before V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai wrote his program as a precocious teenager. Huffington Post is either not disclosing a paid-for series of posts (which would be a massive ethical breach) or they've been taken for a ride. Neither option speaks well of HuffPo and its journalistic integrity.

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