

The Other Tech Figure Who's Trying to Kill Gawker

Shiva Ayyadurai says he invented e-mail and denies any connection to billionaire anti-Gawker crusader Peter Thiel.

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Gawker Media LLC isn't just contending with a legal challenge from a wealthy wrestler backed by an extremely wealthy venture capitalist. There's also the matter of the man who says he invented e-mail—a claim a Gawker website attacked under the [following headline](#): "Corruption, Lies, and Death Threats: The Crazy Story of the Man Who Pretended to Invent E-mail."

Shiva Ayyadurai, the longtime tech entrepreneur who says he invented e-mail, filed a defamation [suit](#) against Gawker on May 11. His lawyer, Charles Harder, also represents Hulk Hogan in a lawsuit that resulted in a \$140 million verdict against Gawker. Peter Thiel, a co-founder of Paypal and current Facebook Inc. board member, is bankrolling the Hogan suit, which was prompted by the publication of a sex tape. Thiel's involvement was kept secret until recently.

Ayyadurai says he signed on with Harder in the days after the Hogan verdict—and, in an interview following news of Thiel's role in the case, he denies any financial link to the billionaire.

The animosity between Ayyadurai and Gawker goes back to 2012, the same year the website published a clip from the Hogan sex tape. A report on Gawker's tech-focused website, Gizmodo, called into question Ayyadurai's claim to have created e-mail as a 14-year-old kid in Newark, N.J., citing evidence of e-mail existing a decade earlier. Quotes from anonymous sources in the story call into question Ayyadurai's credibility with colorful language. A follow-up story on Gawker two years later even mocked Ayyadurai's wife [in a headline](#): "If Fran Drescher Read Gizmodo She Would Not Have Married This Fraud."

To Ayyadurai, the explanation for these attacks is what he characterizes as simple racism. "That image of a dark skinned kid, frankly, doesn't fit the narrative," he said during a video-conference interview this week, dressed in a beige suit jacket and tie, from an

unspecified location in Los Angeles. Now his attorney is seeking \$35 million in damages for defamation. "Dr. Ayyadurai has been publicly humiliated, lost business contracts and received a slew of criticism," reads the complaint.

Gawker denies wrongdoing: "These claims to have invented e-mail have been repeatedly debunked by the Smithsonian Institute, Gizmodo, the *Washington Post* and others," the company said in a statement to Bloomberg.

The entrepreneur explained his case against Gawker, his allegiance to Peter Thiel, and what his fight is really about. Here are the four most interesting parts from an hour-long conversation.

1. Sharing a Lawyer With Hogan, Denying Any Link to Thiel

Harder is the lawyer with multiple cases against Gawker, including the successful lawsuit over Hulk Hogan's sex tape, with financial backing from Thiel. Gawker and its owner, Nick Denton, have raised the question (in previous interviews and to Bloomberg) of whether Thiel is also bankrolling Ayyadurai—a reasonable suspicion, given that Harder is Ayyadurai's lawyer, too. "The real question," Gawker wrote in its statement, "is whether the Facebook board member who's admitted funding a revenge vendetta against Gawker will admit whether he's funding this frivolous case."

Ayyadurai says his case has no financial connection to Thiel. "To be absolutely clear," Ayyadurai said, "my relationship with [Harder] is direct. There is no third party involved." (Neither Harder nor Thiel responded to Bloomberg's request for comment.)

Ayyadurai is a successful businessman with the means to hire an attorney. He has pledged to donate any money won by suing Gawker to his foundation, Innovation Corps. Thiel has said of his own legal effort against Gawker that even a multimillionaire such as Hogan doesn't "quite have the resources to do this alone."

How did Ayyadurai come to have the same attorney as the former wrestler and other anti-Gawker litigants? It was, he says, "fortuitous luck" after years of searching for a willing representative. "I couldn't find any firms." All the lawyers he consulted had conflicts of interest or were otherwise dissuaded from getting involved by the Gizmodo article attacking his e-mail claim. "There is so much vitriol. Whenever people would look at me, they would think I'm a nut."

He happened to contact Harder around the time of the Hogan ruling—and Harder, unlike other attorneys, was willing to take the case because of his recent victory against Gawker.

2. Teaching Gawker a Very Expensive Lesson

While denying a direct link to Thiel, Ayyadurai shares the same values as the tech billionaire. "I can tell you I'm very appreciative that Peter Thiel did fund Hulk Hogan, and they did win," he said. The anti-Gawker lawsuits are "market forces modulating this world of deplorable journalism." To Ayyadurai, Gawker traffics in sensationalism and clickbait. "You can rampantly write whatever you want," he explained. "It's all about getting the clicks." As a counterpoint to that argument, Gawker this week compiled a list of high-impact stories it has produced over the years.

He hopes the lawsuits will teach enterprises such as Gawker a lesson. "Who is Sam Biddle to call me an asshole, dick, and a loon?" he says of the Gawker journalist who wrote the e-mail-debunking story and is named in his suit. "What has he contributed to society?"

Thiel has made similar comments calling into question Gawker's journalism. "I saw Gawker pioneer a unique and incredibly damaging way of getting attention by bullying people, even when there was no connection with the public interest," he said in an interview with the *New York Times*.

As for any claims that the lawsuits threaten the First Amendment, Ayyadurai believes that his suit will serve to improve the free press. "Journalists should be very appreciative of this," he said. "We're going to get higher quality journalism."

3. Yes, He Wants to End Gawker

In addition to whatever money he wins, Ayyadurai hopes that his suit and others like it will ultimately bring about the total destruction of Gawker and its brand of journalism. "Gawker as an organization should cease to exist for the behavior that they've done," he said. "People say Peter Thiel wants to destroy Gawker. I say power to him. They've gotten away, frankly, with deplorable behavior."

The Hogan case has already had financial consequences for Gawker. The company has acknowledged that it is exploring strategic options.

4. The Dispute Over Who Invented E-Mail Is Racist

Ayyadurai insists his invention of e-mail is being ignored because of his race. The U.S. military, which gets credited for creating ARPANET in 1971, participated in what he describes as "technology revisionism." Put simply, Ayyadurai says, his pioneering work on e-mail has been overlooked because of his brown skin. "It is a segregation-type bias," he says. "It must come out of Silicon Valley."

(An earlier version of this story said Gawker had alleged a financial connection between Peter Thiel and Shiva Ayyadurai. A Gawker spokesman said the company has only raised that question.)

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