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CALEB GARLING 06.16.12 6:30 AM



WHO INVENTED EMAIL? JUST ASK ... NOAM CHOMSKY



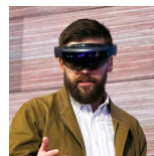
Noam Chomsky — linguist, philosopher, cognitive scientist, and all around critic — has weighed into the debate over who invented email Photo: [Andrew Rusk/Flickr](#)

WHO INVENTED EMAIL? That's a

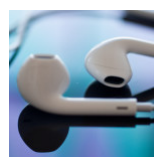
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Chomsky should come as no surprise.

This week, Chomsky — the professor emeritus of linguistics and philosophy at MIT who's known as much for his criticism of US foreign policy and capitalism as much as his academic work — [unexpectedly joined the debate](#) over the origins of email, putting his weight behind V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai, a man who claims he invented email as in 1978 at the age of 14 while working at a medical and dentistry university in New Jersey.

Today, Ayyadurai is a [lecturer at MIT](#), and he once studied with Chomsky. But Chomsky says he backs Ayyadurai's claims for reasons of, yes, semantics.

“Email, upper case, lower case, any case, is the electronic version of the interoffice, inter-organizational mail system, the email we all experience today — and email was invented in 1978 by a 14-year-old working in Newark, NJ. The facts are



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from Ayyadurai.

Yes, by 1978, people were already sending electronic messages across computer networks, but Ayyadurai says he was the first person to build a software program called “email” — and that he was the first to structure electronic communications in a way that mirrored methods traditionally used to move paper mail through an office, setting up electronic “inboxes” and “outboxes” and “address books.”

In February, after some documentation supporting Ayyadurai’s claims was accepted by the Smithsonian, [The Washington Post](#) ran a long profile of the MIT lecturer, describing him as the father of email. But after many objected to his claims, the paper published a mammoth correction, casting considerable doubt over Ayyadurai’s place in the history of email.



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Some trace email all the way back to the mid-'60s and MIT's Compatible Time-Sharing System (CTSS). Originally, CTSS let users remotely log into a single MIT computer and store files to discs where they could be accessed by others, and then in 1961, [Tom Van Vleck](#) developed a "mail" command that let users send electronic messages to other users of the system.

But some argue that this wasn't really email because the messages never left a single machine, that they didn't really go across a network. They say true email arrived several years later on the ARPAnet, the research network funded by the US Department of Defense that would eventually give rise to the internet. In 1971, a man named Ray Tomlinson built a messaging system atop the ARPAnet that sent electronic messages between machines.



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Van Vleck tells Wired. “The argument is over what to call things.”

Chomsky joined the argument on Tuesday. “What continue[s] to be deplorable are the childish tantrums of industry insiders who now believe that by creating confusion on the case of ‘email,’ they can distract attention from the facts,” his statement continues.

Chomsky’s argument is that Ayyadurai received a formal copyright registration on his email program in 1982, and that in 1977, David Crocker — who worked on the ARPAnet and has criticized Ayyadurai’s claims — wrote that “no attempt is being made to emulate a full-scale, inter-organizational mail system.”

“Given the term email was not used prior to 1978, and there was no intention to emulate ‘...a full-scale, inter-organizational mail system,’ as late as December 1977, there is no controversy here, except the one created by industry



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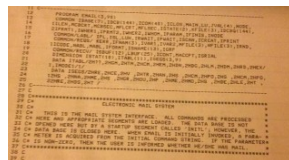
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confirms that he is putting his weight behind Ayyadurai's claims. "What I found out seemed to confirm his story," Chomsky tells Wired. "I read his documentation, the counterarguments, his responses, and his position seemed to me plausible."

But the debate will no doubt continue.



Ayyadurai says that his invention was quite different

Proof, VA Shiva
Ayyadurai says, of his invention of email.

Photo:

www.inventorofemail.com

than anything that came before — that email is the electronic version of the interoffice, inter-organizational paper-based mail *system*. He carefully emphasizes that last word. The predecessors to his creation, he contends, were less organized, much simpler messaging systems. His system, he says, was the first to use the concepts that we recognize in modern tools like Outlook and Gmail.



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IN THE CONVERSATION

In addition to soliciting the backing of Chomsky, Ayyadurai has enlisted the help of his old boss the University of Medical and Dentistry of New Jersey, Leslie Michelson, and he has set up a website to support his claims:

www.inventorofemail.com.

Why is he fighting so hard to stake his claim? "I want to be clear," Ayyadurai tells Wired. "The intention of my sharing the facts was not about getting name and money for the invention of email, but to share what I thought was an inspiring message that even something as grand as email, could get created under the right conditions. What was unfortunate was the reaction."



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