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Tete-a-tete

Mail matters

ANUJ SRIVAS



"The book is about many things, it's about email, it's about invention and I hope it will be inspiring," says Shiva Ayyadurai. Photo: K.V. Srinivasan

The Hindu

He owns the copyright for email. Shiva Ayyadurai tells his story.

At the age of 14, V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai invented the world's first email system and was awarded the first U.S. copyright for "email". This invention would not only shape his life — and bring him to India to work with the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) — but also place him at the centre of a number of controversies over who exactly invented email.

In his first book, *The Email Revolution*, Ayyadurai, an MIT systems scientist, paints a vivid picture of the history of email and why it's still relevant for business communication. More importantly, he looks to tell his side of the story through a perspective that shows that innovation can come from anywhere. Excerpts from an interview:

The Email Revolution has three separate parts, but a common thread that strings it together is your history and association with email. Is this book also a way of trying to set the record straight and hitting back at the critics who doubted the validity of your invention?

When this book was written, I was initially writing it as a business book. It was supposed to be a book about business case studies. But when the story of me creating email came out, which was much later, around 2011 and 2012, a bunch of attacks happened that disputed my story and my invention.

What happened to me at that point was no different than what happened to Philo Farnsworth, who was a 14-year-old boy who invented TV. You look at the invention of TV and email — these were both done by 14-year-old boys. When Philo created TV, he patented it — and then he was destroyed in legal battles.

The vitriol and the backlash were so strong. Much of this (the backlash) was fuelled by a set of computer historians and government contractor Raytheon, who said that their engineer had created email. So Noam Chomsky came out in defence of me and accused my detractors of throwing tantrums.

So when I wrote the book... I wanted to draw attention to something else as well. I realised that people are putting a ton of money into innovation. And I'm not saying that MIT and Silicon Valley don't produce innovation, but why is that the narrative of the two young boys, Philo and me, is not highlighted? It's because it shows that there is another ecosystem for innovation.

So here was an interesting situation, where you are caught in your own narrative. Because if you do defend yourself, people say that you are self-promotional. But if we hadn't found the proper documents, that proved that I created email as an inter-office mail system rather than as a method of text messaging, it would have been very different.

I think this precise reason that people have kept saying email is dead. Because they think email is text messaging. We all suddenly started using email, but we forgot it was created for business communication.

So I think it's important that the record gets set straight for two reasons. The first is that it goes down to the arc of the true narrative about innovation, which is that innovation can occur anywhere.

The other is from an Indian standpoint. For some reasons, the symbols and icons of Indian innovation, Aryabhata for instance, have become folk lore. But America does a lot to have that image of Thomas Edison or Steve Jobs. Who do we have? My view is that a picture of a 14-year-old Indian kid inventing email will do more for a young kid here than putting money into innovation centres like CSIR.

The record needs to be set straight. So the book is about many things, it's about email, it's about invention and I hope it will be inspiring.

When people say email is dead, don't you think they mean that email is now simply a utility? It's like electricity — something that people need to have — but also something that no longer serves as a competitive advantage.

Yes, that's true to a little extent. But when you really look at it — we may both be friends of a hundred celebrities through Facebook and Twitter. But how many of those people's email IDs do you have? Probably very few.

My point is that email is a business communications utility. A number of European and English courts allow you to issue summons with it and warrants for arrest with it. It has become the mainstay of business-to-consumer communications.

So yes, it's true that email is a utility now — but that doesn't mean it's irrelevant. From an economic standpoint, the reality is that is that 10 to 20 times more commerce gets closed through email. Social media is like a big trade-show. You get to network... you get to make friends and followers. But email is where those friends and followers become customers.

So my point is that email is going back to wherever it came from. It was started as a business communications tool — and it went to personal messaging — and now it's coming back to being a business tool.

Email really got lost — that's my point. We took this poor child for granted, because when we got free email, everybody just started using it for all sorts of purposes.

So doesn't this mean that e-mail has lost the personal aspect? For instance, children and teenagers no longer use email.

You're right — nobody did personal business memos in the old days. We're just going back full circle. We have this transition now — where all these three streams (chat, social media and email) have found their purposes. So now my nephew, he just does texting. I don't even want him using email because he doesn't know how to write!

But when he joins the business world, he will have to follow the etiquette of business communication which includes email. I think when people learn to use email as a sales channel, you'll get more sales. And it's a legal medium... it can be used in a court of law and so on.

This is why I think the book is timely. People and companies need to realise how to integrate email with other mediums.

A part of your book focuses on the relationship between surveillance and “free” email. How do you think the Snowden revelations will affect online communication?

So there's this thesis that, if left alone, human beings will just cause chaos and kill themselves. That's not true. Human beings do want peace, stability and harmony and that comes through democracy.

If you look at the origins of the postal service in the U.S., the founding fathers created it to protect democratic rights. The postal service used to be used for sharing political literature. This was the origin of mail. And there were laws that were forged to make sure that the Government couldn't tamper with our physical mail. There were laws that were created to protect the rights of the U.S. citizens with regard to the postal service.

So when you look at what Snowden is saying — he's saying the Government is watching us. In 1993, when the web came, you had Hotmail, AOL and so on. What they did was say “Hey okay, I'll offer you guys free email.” But nobody went and read the fine print on their privacy policies — those companies actually own your email. In the race to get free email, we gave up our rights.

What can we do when private companies own email? We give up all rights. In the Egypt revolution, Mubarak called up Vodafone and asked them to turn off access to Twitter. When there's the government and a private company, they can have that kind of collusion. So my view is that the U.S. postal service should have listened to me — they should have given us the option to pay 20 bucks and get a paid-for version of email. Our email would have been protected under laws that we had fought for years to apply to physical post.

But can people go back to paying for email, after becoming accustomed to using it for free?

I've done surveys and some research. Americans are willing to pay something nominal, I'm not sure what the price point is, in order to make sure that their privacy is secure. They will do it. They will pay for it because they know that there will be a set of laws that makes sure the Government cannot tamper with email.

I think that there is a value proposition. This is it: you can use free email, but just know that you don't own it. And if people think you're a terrorist tomorrow, they can snoop into your email account and shut it down.

So if you look at a hypothetical U.S. postal service-backed form of email, it doesn't work the same way, since there are laws protecting it. This thing gives you all the laws in a democratic nation. You have jurisprudence... If people are going to shut it down, they have to issue a preliminary injunction. They would have to go to court and so on. Private companies can just take a unilateral decision based on a 60-page privacy policy that nobody has the time to read.

Do you think things in India have changed, with regards to the academic and research environment, after your controversial exit from the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research?

See, you can't try to hide truth for that long. You have a great organisation to the extent that there are a lot of smart people here. But there are problems here. Gobind Khorana — who was an MIT colleague of mine — he couldn't even get as a job as an instructor here in India. He left and then became a Nobel Prize winner.

So clearly something is wrong — and I think it comes down to freedom and respect. When I created the email in the U.S., my mentor could have easily copyrighted it and taken credit for it. If I had done this (create email) at CSIR, I would have been obliterated. They have this feudal mentality, they don't want to let a subordinate have any type of recognition, because they think it will diminish them.

And it's true, it would diminish them, because many of those guys who are there are incompetent. They haven't done anything... they learned how to be clever. That whole system credits cleverness, how you manipulate, how you get papers published.

I would even say that less than two per cent of their patents have any value. But I met a lot of smart people there, that's the flipside. There are a lot of smart people and they deserve the light of the day.

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