

Judicial Communications Office

12 September 2025

COURT DELIVERS RULING ON PRELIMINARY ISSUE ON DEFAMATION PROCEEDINGS BROUGHT BY PAUL TWEED

Summary of Judgment

Mr Justice Colton, sitting today in the High Court in Belfast, delivered judgment in respect of a preliminary issue in a defamation action brought by Paul Tweed against an author, Andreas Krieg. Mr Tweed claims that text in a book and a social media post by the author could be understood to mean that Mr Tweed is an agent of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) who writes warning letters and/or institutes legal proceedings for the purpose of intimidating those who are critical of the political regime in that country. The preliminary issue for the court to determine was the “single meaning” of the publications that are the subject of the complaint.

Principle 18 of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers provides that: “Lawyers shall not be identified with their clients or their clients’ causes as a result of discharging their functions.” The court said that, in its view, it is this principle which underlies Mr Tweed’s (“the plaintiff”) defamation action. The action arises from two publications:

- The text in Chapter 6 of a book written by Andreas Krieg (“the defendant”) entitled “Subversion, the Strategic Weaponisation of Narratives” (“the Book”) published by Georgetown University Press on 1 May 2023. On page 164, the defendant states: “A London-based consultancy, Cornerstone Global Associates – according to the New York Times a part of the UAE’s information network in Europe – closely works with a British libel lawyer to send aggressive cease-and-desist letters to academic publishers, universities, and social media companies in an effort to target individuals critical of the UAE and its regional policy. The libel lawyer thereby targets not just references to Cornerstone and its director but also mentions of other individuals closely aligned with Abu Dhabi’s information nexus – most notably Mohammed Dahlan allegedly a key interlocutor for the Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince MbZ. This type of lawfare is meant to intimidate critics and provides the UAE’s information network with ammunition to attack such critics.” For the purposes of this application, it was not in dispute that the “libel lawyer” in question is the plaintiff.
- A post published by the defendant on his X account on 14 July 2023 (“the Post”). The Post included a photograph of the plaintiff and contained the following text: “Emails show the lawyer suggested an aggressive strategy to #UAE Secret Agent ‘Matar’ over Princess Latifa. But also, that he fought against Facebook and Twitter to obtain the removal of content related to the prisoner Maryam al-Balushi.” The Post was accompanied by a link to an article published by a European media outlet (Heidi.News).

The plaintiff’s pleadings

The plaintiff alleges that both publications were defamatory of him entitling him to damages. He pleaded that in their natural and ordinary meaning, the words complained of in the Book and Post meant, and were understood to mean, that he is a subversive, covert agent of the UAE who

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improperly writes warning letters and/or institutes legal proceedings for the purpose of silencing voices in the West who are critical of the UAE; that he writes warning letters and/or institutes legal proceedings, not in the interests of his clients, but for the improper purpose of intimidating critics of the UAE; that he uses his legal practice to unfairly and improperly target academic publishers, universities and social media companies in order to protect or advance the interests of the political regime in the UAE; and that he is an unethical solicitor who abuses his position as an officer of the court to use litigation for purposes that are ulterior to the administration of justice.

The court's task

Prior to the abolition of juries in defamation actions in Northern Ireland¹ the role of the trial judge was to exclude unreasonable meanings from the pleadings and leave it to the jury to determine the single meaning that they found the statement to bear. This task now falls to the trial judge.

The leading authority in this area² refers to the court's task as being to "determine the single natural and ordinary meaning of the words complained of, which is the meaning that the hypothetical reasonable reader would understand the words bear. It goes on to set out thirteen governing principles to be followed by the court when carrying out this task. Context is particularly important when the words complained of are part of a book and the ordinary reasonable reader is taken to have read the whole of the book.

The court also cited recent decisions³ which focus on the legal principles in relation to determining the single, natural and ordinary meaning of words complained of in social media posts, including Twitter, where "short bursts of pithily expressed information are the norm, and a single tweet rarely exists in isolation from others". It noted that a tweet that is said to be libellous may include a hyperlink and may need to be read as part of a series of tweets which the ordinary reader will have seen at the same time as the relevant tweet. The case law states that Twitter is a conversational medium so it would be wrong to engage in elaborate analysis of a 140-character tweet but that the approach must take account of the whole tweet and the context in which the ordinary reasonable reader would read that tweet. The hypothetical reader must be taken to be a reasonable representative of users of Twitter who follow the defendant.

The court's analysis of the Book

The court said it had considered the Book in its entirety, noting it was not an easy read. Counsel for the defendant contended that the thesis of the Book is that it is not the activities of the private individuals in the information environment that are subversive, but the strategic orchestration of those activities by external adversaries for the purposes of eroding social consensus. It was argued that in addressing the issue of meaning the court should have regard to the probable ordinary reader of the Book being "a niche expert audience with practitioner background."

Counsel for the plaintiff countered this by reference to reviews suggesting that the subject of the Book has a value for a broader readership, including media, civil society, policy makers, lay people and anyone seeking to understand the intricate landscape of information warfare.

¹ The Defamation Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

² *Koutsogiannis v The Random House Group Ltd* [2020] 4 WLR 25 (approved by the Court of Appeal in *Millett v Corbyn* [2021] EWCA Civ 567).

³ *Monroe v Hopkins* [2017] EWHC 433 (QB); *Aluko v Barton* [2025] EWHC 853 (KB) and *Vine v Barton* [2024] EWHC 1268 (KB)

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Counsel for the plaintiff also drew attention to the fact that the defendant appeared on GB News to explain and promote the Book.

The defendant pleaded that the text, when properly analysed does not have a defamatory meaning. The plaintiff, however, pleaded a range of meanings in general terms ranging from an allegation that he acted unprofessionally as a solicitor to the most extreme meaning that he is a subversive covert agent of the UAE.

Applying the legal principles, the court was of the view that the words complained of do fall foul of Principle 18 of the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers and said:

“The primary target of the criticism is the London-based consultancy Cornerstone Global Associates (alleged to be a part of the UAE’s information network in Europe). It is alleged that it closely works with the plaintiff to send aggressive cease and desist letters to academic publishers, universities and social media companies. It is alleged that the purpose of these letters is to target individuals critical of the UAE and its regional policy.”

The court said that words such as “the libel lawyer therefore targets”, “aggressive cease-and-desist letters”, “lawfare”, “is meant to intimidate critics”, “provides the UAE’s information network with ammunition to attack such critics” are clearly critical of the plaintiff. It was also significant that in referring to “civil-societal actors” this included such actors who “do not play by the rules”⁴ and, further, the back cover of the Book includes the following: “Subversion examines how malicious state and non-state actors take advantage of the information space to sew political chaos.”

The court considered that the reasonable hypothetical reader of the Book would conclude that in their natural and ordinary meaning, the words complained of mean that the plaintiff acted unprofessionally in his work on behalf of Cornerstone Global Associates. It said the “sting” of the words complained of is that in identifying the plaintiff they fail to recognise his proper and legitimate role in acting on behalf of his client. The court did not consider that the same reader would reasonably conclude that the words meant the plaintiff was a subversive covert agent of the UAE who was involved in some improper or nefarious conduct to protect or advance the interests of a particular political regime. It said the identification does not go that far and, in short, the sting here relates to alleged unprofessional behaviour. That being so, the court ruled that the single correct meaning of the words complained of in the Book is that:

“The plaintiff acted unprofessionally in working with Cornerstone Global Associates and others in sending aggressive cease and desist letters to academic publishers, universities and social media companies in an effort to target and intimidate individuals critical of UAE and its regional policy.”

The Post

⁴ See page 175 of the Book.

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The court noted that the relevant authorities in relation to the ordinary meanings of tweets state that an impressionistic approach is more fitting and appropriate to that medium and that an over-elaborate analysis is inappropriate.

The court commented that as far as the ordinary reasonable reader might be concerned, the matters referred to in the Post are not matters of ordinary general knowledge. That said, there was evidence before the court that the defendant had 15,100 followers and the screenshot of the Post (taken the day after publication) demonstrated that it had 2,494 views. It stated it was probable that the defendant's followers include those working in media, politics, business and academia and therefore are likely to be well educated in middle east affairs and have knowledge of Maryam Al-Balooshi.

Applying the relevant principles and taking into account the parties' submissions, the court concluded that the words complained of do have a defamatory meaning:

"The focus of the Post is on the plaintiff. It is the solicitor who is identified both in the text and in the accompanying photograph. The impressionistic view that I formed when first reading the text was that it was an express criticism of a solicitor in carrying out his professional role. As is the case with the Book, whilst the Post identifies the plaintiff with his client, it does not do so to the extent that a reasonable reader would conclude that he was somehow a secret agent of the UAE. The sting of the Post is that he has acted unprofessionally in acting on behalf of a secret agent "Matar" and in the removal of content from Facebook and Twitter. I consider that the reasonable reader of the Post and, in particular, followers of the defendant would conclude that in doing so, the plaintiff acted unprofessionally."

The court ruled that the single correct meaning of the words complained of is that:

"The plaintiff acted unprofessionally in suggesting an aggressive strategy to a UAE secret agent and in fighting against Facebook and Twitter to obtain the removal of content on behalf of his client."

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. This summary should be read together with the judgment and should not be read in isolation. Nothing said in this summary adds to or amends the judgment. The full judgment will be available shortly on the Judiciary NI website (<https://www.judiciaryni.uk/>).

ENDS

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