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Harrison Ford, Jennifer Lopez, Michael Jackson and Britney Spears are among Paul Tweed's clients (Getty Images photos)

# Commentary: Heavyweight Irish lawyer picks fight with pending U.S. libel legislation

By Steve Brennan  
April 8, 2009, 06:15 PM ET



### SHARPER PICTURE

International Editor Steve Brennan keeps tabs on the global TV business, breaking down the latest developments for U.S. execs.

Why might the stars of such worldwide television phenomena as the "CSI" franchise, "Lost" or any of the myriad global hits from the U.S. want to say a big thank you to a soft-spoken and unassuming lawyer from Northern Ireland?

It might be that his current course of action could save celebrities their money and dignity one day. At least that's how he sees it.

Paul Tweed, a fiftysomething libel attorney, reckons it will cost defamed U.S. stars big bucks and raw deals if federal libel legislation introduced in the House of Representatives gets the green light.

New rules being drafted could make it harder for America's rich and famous to sue U.S. tabloids in Europe when they are libeled by European versions of their publications, whether in print or on the Web. Although designed to protect U.S. citizens from judgments in foreign courts, Tweed believes it also will have the effect of preventing citizens with genuine defamation cases from pursuing their cases internationally.

The development, Tweed says, comes at a time when U.S. TV stars are more popular than ever in Europe, with so many American shows airing across so many platforms there.

Pinstriped and proper, the partner at Johnsons Solicitors of London, Belfast and Dublin says he doesn't want to dabble in U.S. affairs but is compelled to because the legislation spills right onto his turf.

Although every bit the Belfast native, Tweed is no stranger to Hollywood and New York, where his clients have included Harrison Ford, Liam Neeson, Britney Spears, Michael Jackson and Jennifer Lopez, among others. He's become the attorney of choice for actors who want to take on the tabloids in a manner that Tweed has made his trademark -- and he has not lost a case.

He explains that while the First Amendment makes suing for libel a hard road to travel in the U.S., "if the publications appear on European newsstands or are published by the paper in Europe on the Internet, then you can sue anywhere in the European Union where the alleged libel is published."

The result for the celebrity usually comes in the form of a retraction or apology for the offending story, as well as damages.

"This is a huge comfort zone for top-level actors, particularly now with distribution of U.S. TV hits to wider audiences than ever before in Europe on traditional broadcast, satellite, the Web, DVD and so on," Tweed says. He reasons that when a libel is published involving one of these stars in the U.S. and then repeated in Europe, "the impact today on that star's reputation is probably more profound than ever before in the history of broadcast."

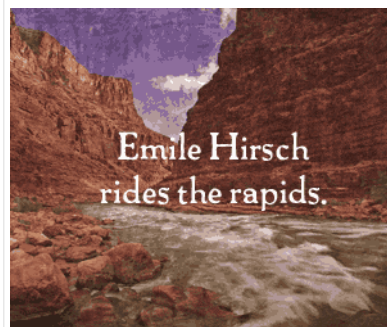
But now Tweed finds himself in the news here for something other than his legal battles on behalf of celebrities: He's fighting legislative moves he says effectively could block U.S. celebrities from suing in Europe no matter how big their fan base there. He's been addressing legal confabs and august bodies like the Beverly Hills Bar Assn. as part of his one-man campaign.

Two so-called "libel tourism" bills could go forward for congressional approval. "One (bill) simply seeks to block the enforcement of U.K./Irish libel judgments, but the other is more draconian, proposing to penalize any U.S. citizen who has the temerity to sue a U.S. publisher for libel in the U.K. with triple damages and costs awarded against him as opposed to the publisher," Tweed says.

"Although Hollywood stars will still be able to sue British and other international publishers in the U.K. and Ireland, I believe this bill will have a chilling effect in deterring them from suing U.S. publications, such as the National Enquirer, abroad."

Some might say Tweed is out to protect a lucrative business he's built up during the past three decades, but he defends his position.

"I have never actually had to seek enforcement in the U.S. but relied on action against local distributors or defendants"



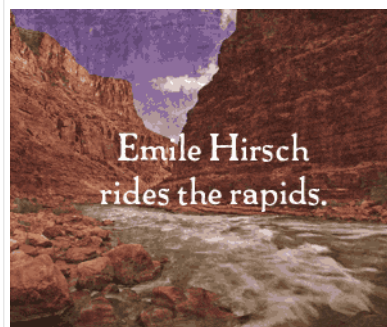
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European assets or, more commonly, the good sense of the publisher concerned to reach an amicable settlement before legal costs mount up," he says. "Accordingly, this legislation will not impact my own practice."

In a letter to California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tweed writes that for those affected by the potential changes in the law, "the legislation will serve only to prejudice Americans who are libeled by U.S. publishers abroad, because in being deterred from suing, the defamatory allegations against them may be taken as being factually correct by an overseas readership who will be unable to comprehend their failure to take legal action."

Whether Tweed is successful remains to be seen. But his arguments highlight just how visible U.S. stars continue to be around the globe.



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April 09, 2009  
If the Governor of California, a man whose position was dependent upon the votes of a democratic society, is choosing to use foreign lawyers who service those that want to deny freedom of expression to other Americans, then Californians have every reason to petition for a recall election.
- 2. Ratkins comments:  
April 09, 2009  
Paul Tweed should be remonstrating with his legal colleagues in the UK who use the UK libel law in a thoroughly dishonourable way to silence critics of the powerful and corrupt as well as the free speech of many who are in dangerous zones and putting themselves on the line for democracy; this is the sole reason for the mooted libel legislation in the US. There are certainly many in the UK who call for libel law here to be revised. Not all lawyers in the UK practice in this fashion but of the ones that do it is the American celebrities who engage them for their squabbles with tabloids that are the bread and butter for UK law firms like Carter-Ruck and Schillings. (Schillings for example represented the Government of Saudi Arabia in a complaint about a critical Channel 4 programme - they lost by the way) and who use UK libel law not only to suppress free speech but also preventing the publication of information about unstable banks thereby potentially causing hardship to thousands of UK citizens. As mentioned, not all UK libel firms are involved in this reprehensible activity (and I imagine

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