Free Speech Union briefing

# Obtaining Damages by Deception

David Rose

*May 2026*

Last summer, the "King of the Trolls" Sebastian Bond became the mostvilified man in Britain. Unmasked as the shadowy figure behind the "toxic" online gossip forum Tattle Life, he was denounced in newspapers, Parliament and on daytime TV.

Bond's humiliation came at the hands of Northern Irish couple Neil Sands and Donna Sands who had sued him for libel, breach of privacy and harassment. Bond was ordered to pay £300,000 in damages, his worldwide assets were frozen to cover the Sands' legal fees – in excess of £1 million – and he was publicly humiliated.

On 5th May, that judgment was set aside.

Mr Justice Humphreys, sitting in the High Court of Northern Ireland, ruled "without hesitation" that the Sands, and the lawyers acting for them, had failed to serve any proceedings on Mr Bond, and since then had engaged in "repeated" and "egregious" breaches of their obligation to make full and frank disclosures to the court for two years. Mr Justice Humphreys concluded that the court had been "misled" by the Sands' lawyers.

In short, Bond was the victim of an appalling miscarriage of justice. The entire case brought against him was a nullity – and had only succeeded because of the other side's failure to comply with the most basic legal duties.

"These irregularities were not mere technicalities," Mr Justice Humphreys said. "They had very serious consequences for the defendants in terms of the further steps the plaintiffs were able to take in obtaining judgment, injunctive relief and a WFO."

Today, Bond's life isin ruins and he's become an international hate figure. This briefing is an attempt to correct the record.

**What happened**

The case made headlines through its apparent good-versus-evil simplicity. According to the judgment issued by Mr Justice McAlinden in the Northern Ireland High Court, Bond had been "peddling untruths for profit" and built his site to "monetise people's misery". The BBC claimed Tattle Life had made millions of pounds from advertising while ruining the lives of its subjects – minor celebrities and influencers. It had, it said, caused some

to suffer serious detriment to their mental health, such as the model Katie Price.

According to the judge, all this was made much worse by the fact that, since founding the site in 2018, Tattle Life's owner had hidden his identity, so making it "practically impossible" for its victims to sue. This meant that when the Sands launched their case in June 2023, the court allowed them to take the unusual step of filing it against "persons unknown", and to conceal their own identities behind meaningless initials. It also imposed a blanket reporting ban.

The secrecy was not lifted until last June, after the Sands and their lawyers told the court they had identified Tattle Life's owner as Bond through what they called a "global forensic investigation". Only then could it be revealed that Mr Justice McAlinden had awarded them £300,000 in damages, the legal maximum in Northern Ireland, and imposed an order freezing Bond's worldwide assets to the value of £1.8 million to cover the Sands' legal costs. Free to speak, Neil and Donna Sands embarked on a TV talk show victory lap on both sides of the Irish Sea.

At first sight, there doesn't seem to be much in the case of the Sands vs. Bond that might relate to freedom of speech, and it could be said that providing a platform for people to make unpleasant comments about influencers is not a socially useful way to make money.

But in the wake of a fresh High Court judgment that quashes the original verdict, handed down on May 5th by a different judge, Mr Justice Humphreys, it is evident that it raises deeply troubling issues – while newly-disclosed documents make plain that it was fought on a false basis from the outset. The FSU has known the truth for almost a year, which is why we have supported Bond.

Although the Sands and their lawyers did not tell the court that they knew of Bond's identity and his role in Tattle Life until the end of 2024, in reality they had this information much earlier, weeks before the case was launched. On 6th June 2023, they had been given a 35-page report by the international private investigation firm Nardello and Co, which revealed Bond's connection to Tattle Life, his address, life story and personal email address. Yet they didn't disclose this information, even though the document contained Bond's photo, its accuracy confirmed by an investigator who had knocked on his door at his Dorset home the previous month and got

him to confirm his name. Indeed, they first learnt of Bond's involvement even earlier, in April 2023.

It is therefore clear that the secrecy that surrounded the case for almost two years was only imposed because the Sands and their lawyers misled the court, not once but repeatedly, through a series of hearings before three successive High Court judges, in which they continued to make the bogus claim that they did not know who was behind Tattle Life. Astonishingly, their own solicitor has now admitted he failed in his "duty of candour" to the court, which is especially great when a case is allowed to proceed against "persons unknown".

The upshot was Bond did not realise he was being sued until long after Mr Justice McAlinden issued a default, unopposed judgment and was deprived of his right to defend himself.

Had he been aware of what was happening, Bond would have contested the Sands' allegations vigorously. But the first he knew of the existence of a case against him was when he tried to withdraw money from his Nationwide account in December 2024 and was told he couldn't because a court had issued an order freezing his assets worldwide. For another six months, he didn't know why, because the secrecy orders stayed in place, their terms so draconian that Nationwide was prohibited from disclosing any details. It could not even tell Bond the name of the court that had issued the freeze.

Simply put, a man was deprived of access to his lawfully-earned income for the best part of two years and came close to being ruined because of a lawsuit involving important issues of free speech about which he knew nothing, though it rested on untruths that the court failed to scrutinise. As a result, vital matters of high public interest have remained unexamined. To what extent should platform hosts be liable for comments made by their users? Where is the line between harassment and the lawful exercise of free speech? The default judgment and absence of a trial mean we are none the wiser.

"This was like a SLAPP on steroids," says the FSU's Director Lord Young of Acton. "A wealthy couple were able to shut down unwanted speech about themselves by securing a court judgment without even the most basic legal process. Anyone who worries about the powerful or wealthy using high-powered lawyers to shut down free speech should be terrified

by this case."

Last year, the solicitor who led the Sands' legal team, Rory Lynch, the head of the reputation management department in the international law firm Gateley's, bragged on LinkedIn that although "many had tried and failed to unmask the anonymous operator of trolling website Tattle Life" he had obtained "gold standard intel" by playing a "cat and mouse game across the world". In October, Gateley's website announced that, thanks to his work for the Sands, Lynch had been shortlisted for a prestigious award – Reputation Lawyer of the Year.

He did not have long to bask in glory. In March, Lynch swore an extraordinary affidavit in which he apologised to the Northern Ireland High Court, to Sebastian Bond and to his own KC, Gavin Millar (who had not represented the Sands at the earlier hearings). He now realises, the affidavit says, that the evidence identifying Bond "should have been disclosed to the Court" when the case was launched in 2023 and at the subsequent secret hearings when the Sands obtained their default judgment and award of costs and damages.

On 5th May, the legal case Lynch brought – and boasted about – has been branded the product of "serious and repeated failures" to comply with basic legal processes.

Like the best-selling memoir and film *The Salt Path*, the Tattle Life narrative requires revision.

**Folie a Deux**

Sixteen years ago, the main protagonists in this drama, Bond, who is now 42, and Neil Sands, 44, worked in similar jobs at the same firm: as IT consultants at Accenture. They probably never met. In 2010, Sands was based in Silicon Valley, while Bond, who had a degree in computing from Brighton University, was being sent to less glamorous sites in Britain and Europe.

Brought up near Gloucester by parents who were teachers, Bond led a quiet life in his twenties. He loathed his work, telling me in an interview last year for *UnHerd* that it was "lonely and boring". In 2013, he bought a house in Glastonbury and got into DIY and rock climbing. He also acquired a new job at Lovehoney, an online sex shop, then left to set up his first

website, Nest and Glow, which published vegan recipes. Soon it was making £3,000 a month from advertising. When he started being offered money to promote products he didn't actually like, it opened his eyes to the parasitical world of internet influencers, which he saw as "a cheap, insidious way to advertise brands". To his disgust, he learnt that "if you've got 30,000 followers, you can easily make double what a nurse makes in a year".

Out of that disgust was born Tattle Life, a forum with thousands of threads about various influencers, featuring posts from registered users who, like Bond himself, mostly posted anonymously. By 2022, when he closed the site to new registrants, it had 42,000 users, and that year its income from advertisements hit £550,000. (Both these figures have since fallen by more than half.) Almost three-quarters of its posts were from women commenting on female influencers. Many were derogatory.

Last summer, when Bond was named and vilified, some of the site's subjects made extreme claims. According to the BBC, Katie Price had "done a number of stints at a mental health hospital as a result of trolling on Tattle Life", which had not only published wounding comments and her "confidential mail", but threats against her family.

I have reviewed many of the thousands of Tattle Life posts about Price. Some are cruel, disparaging her appearance and character. But despite the claims made by Bond's many enemies, I have seen none that revealed private information or contained physical threats. According to Bond, any that did would swiftly have been removed by his team of content moderators, assisted by software that automatically deletes posts containing any one of 1,040 keywords with violent or sexual connotations. Moreover, if Tattle Life had published such threats, its operator could have been criminally charged, and its main sources of income, Google Adsense and its rival Monumetric, would likely have imposed a ban, which, despite the adverse publicity, they never have.

As for the posts about Neil and Donna Sands, when they launched their case on 23rd June 2023 and asked for it to be conducted in secret, the judge who presided at the first hearing, Mr Justice Friedman, said he thought much of the Tattle Life posts about them were relatively mild. In his view, most of them consisted of "the sort of content that you see in magazines like *Hello* and *OK!* which tell you what so and so is wearing" and were "benign". The Sands claimed that Tattle Life had been

"cyberstalking" them and exposing them to risk by publishing their address. In fact, this was readily available from documents filed at Companies House, which would appear when anyone Googled their names. They also complained about a post that mentioned they were building a new house, although they had publicised this on Instagram, and another that suggested they were "stupid" – a comment by a Tattle Life user about a video they posted themselves showing them breaking the law while driving.

So, who are Neil and Donna Sands? Neil, his parents and four siblings have humble origins. In 2000, when his sister Anita was at Queen's University in Belfast, she gave an interview in which she described her father, Conor, as a "self-employed TV aerial contractor". Nowadays, Con, Neil and another sister, Irene, have a stable of 40 thoroughbreds, Bronsan Racing, and in 2023, they paid £1.1 million for a single horse, which they raced – unsuccessfully – at Royal Ascot. Donna started her own clothing label, and her social media posts portray a lavish lifestyle, including visits to the Ritz, yacht parties in Monaco, and other trappings of the couple's apparent wealth.

The Sands have had their ups and downs. In 2017, when Neil was living in San Francisco, he filed a bizarre lawsuit against his former girlfriend in which he claimed that when she left him for being unfaithful, she stole their dog. For this, he demanded damages, along with custody of the animal. Papers filed in her defence claimed he had sent hundreds of messages to her and her parents, "stalking me by social media and text". Sands dropped the case before it came to trial.

His sister Irene Sands has practised as a criminal barrister, and in 2020 received what the Gardai described as a "credible threat" to her life, having been caught up in a feud between two drug gangs. Reports in the Irish media suggested the reason was her friendship with a gangster named Robbie Lawlor, who was shot dead in Belfast and then named as the prime suspect for the grisly murder and dismemberment of a teenage boy, whose body parts were found spread across various locations in Dublin.

Meanwhile, the world was battling Covid. By now back in Ireland, Neil attracted widespread media coverage for an effort to raise funds to help Irish doctors and nurses stranded abroad return home. Having raised some €85,000, this ended in acrimony when four of the scheme's volunteers complained that he had failed to register it as a company or charity, and

that photographs he posted on social media of himself wearing a gold Rolex watch and a shirt with his initials embroidered on the cuff had created "disgust".

Sands was also criticised by the Irish army, in which he was a reservist, for publicising the Covid initiative with a photo of him wearing an army uniform alongside Conor McGregor, the mixed martial arts fighter who was later ordered to pay €250,000 damages for raping a woman at a Dublin hotel. According to an army spokesman, Sands was "told to desist unauthorised activities in uniform".

By then, he was attracting further media coverage with a scheme to manufacture surgical masks and provide them at "cost price". Arrotek, a medical products firm in Sligo, agreed to provide a building free of charge, but the plan fizzled out. In October 2020, Sands' Belfast company, Fox Design Thinking, was awarded a £33 million contract by the Northern Ireland government to supply masks. Sands said no more in public about "cost price" masks and made a tidy profit: in the wake of this deal, company accounts show the value of Fox's assets rose from less than £1 million to £12.7 million.

The Tattle Life thread about the Sands began in February 2021, with posters commenting on a dispute between Donna and her then-business partner. Early on, there were posts suggesting that Neil – described as "this eegit" – might be to blame, and disparaging comments about his cost price masks and the threats against Irene. Yet many of the posts about Donna were respectful, even affectionate. The couple emailed Tattle Life asking it to delete the thread. It did not comply.

A few months later, someone established an anonymous Instagram account called The Detechtives. It issued an online form for followers to "report trolls anonymously" and sent threats to Tattle Life users who had posted comments about the Sands, claiming The Detechtives had software designed for counter-terrorism they would use to hunt the posters down. Numerous Tattle Life followers deleted their accounts. With his business under threat, Bond investigated The Detechtives' digital footprint – and discovered Sands was behind it. Using a female alias, Bond sent an email to Neil's personal address, saying that if he did not close The Detechtives down he would sue. Less than an hour later, its account disappeared. Meanwhile, Neil sent a message to someone who, unbeknownst to him, was in touch with Bond. "There has been a threat. We have to stop," it

said, “please don’t share this information.”

The Tattle Life thread about the Sands grew longer. In the spring of 2023, they decided to sue the “persons unknown” who ran the site.

**The Whole Truth?**

The Sands’ claim that they did not know who ran Tattle Life was central to how they fought their case and largely determined its outcome. Their lawyers said in legal documents filed before the first hearing on 23rd June 2023 that issuing proceedings against an unnamed person or persons breached the usual principles of open justice and free speech. But, they added, it was justified because Tattle Life “operates anonymously” and “hosts content from anonymous account holders”. Mr Justice Friedman agreed, although he said this must be regularly reviewed: the secrecy must end once it was known who ran Tattle Life.

To assist their investigations, he also issued an order requiring Xenforo, the firm whose servers hosted it, to disclose any information it had about Tattle Life, and allowing the Sands to serve their claim by email to a Hotmail address that had once been published on Tattle Life.

The next hearing took place on 8th September before Mr Justice McAlinden. The Sands’ barrister, Peter Girvan, said the question of who ran Tattle Life was still being investigated but had not been “bottomed out”. Worse, whoever that might turn out to be was treating the court with contempt. As stipulated by the court in July, the Sands’ lawyers had served the claim by email. However, because ten weeks had now elapsed and they had not received a response, Girvan asked the judge to hand them a default victory. McAlinden concurred, saying “the fact that convinces me is that there has been no engagement whatsoever”.

They were back in court on 1st December, when McAlinden awarded the Sands aggravated and exemplary damages of £150,000 each. He was told by their lawyers that the Sands had engaged a “recognized leader in the global investigative sector” to uncover the persons unknown, but that its work remained “ongoing”. On that basis, the secrecy orders stayed in place. It was not until November 2024, when the Sands returned to court yet again to seek an order freezing Bond’s assets, that they finally disclosed that Bond ran Tattle Life. On 9th December 2024, McAlinden assessed the total costs at £1.5 million and agreed to the £1.8 million freeze. Even

then, nothing could be published until 13th June 2025, when the Sands asked for the secrecy orders to be lifted.

Given that history, the first newly-disclosed document, the Nardello and Co report dated 6th June 2023 – 17 days before the Sands asked for the secrecy orders and to sue "persons unknown" – is explosive. Beneath a heading that reads "Sebastian Bond – Profile", it says an investigation of his "digital footprint" has "identified a plethora of circumstantial ties between Bond… and Tattle Life". Although he had used a female alias when threatening to sue The Detechtives, that "does not exclude Bond from being the figure behind the site". The report goes on to set out his life story, details about his parents, education, previous employment, where he had lived, and his current address in Poole, where a Nardello operative knocked on his door on 26th May. It also included Bond's real personal email address, which he still uses.

Nardellos supplied a longer, even more detailed report on 23rd August, more than a fortnight before the hearing where Mr Justice McAlinden gave default judgment. It said that while it was possible that others were also involved, "we have established with a high degree of certainty that Bond is linked to Tattle Life".

Further disclosures have established that the Sands' lawyers and Nardello's knew where Bond lived as early as 14th April – more than two months before the first High Court hearing in June. The reason, say documents filed by Bond's KC Tony McGleenan, was that long before Mr Justice Friedman ordered Xenforo to tell the Sands what it knew about Tattle Life, a "confidential source" at the website hosting firm had told Neil Sands that Bond was behind it – an apparent breach of data protection law. The result, says the law firm now representing Bond, RPC, was that despite their claims of ignorance made in front of three High Court judges, "the identity and relevant addresses of the 'person unknown' were entirely known to the First Plaintiff [Neil Sands] and his representatives".

The evidence that the court was misled was now overwhelming; hence the new affidavit by Gateley's chief of its reputation management department, Rory Lynch, dated 6th March 2026. In this, he admits he knew that Bond was the main person under investigation from April 2023, and that, even back then, he was viewed as a "possible defendant". Previous claims made by him and the Sands' other lawyers were, he says, "incomplete", and his new affidavit was intended to correct this "omission". But this, he

insists, was “not deliberate”, and it “was not intended to withhold information from the court” to “secure a tactical advantage”.

Nevertheless, Lynch’s affidavit continues, “I now accept that the fact that Sebastian Bond had become the principal focus of the investigation from April 2023… should have been disclosed to the court when applications concerning service, default judgment and assessment of damages were made in 2023… I wish to apologise to the court, the Defendant and the Plaintiffs’ leading counsel.”

According to Bryn Harris, the FSU’s legal director, such an apology from a senior lawyer is almost certainly unprecedented.

Meanwhile, the failure to serve the claim and other legal documents via Bond’s personal email address, despite Lynch and the Sands knowing it from the outset, explains why Bond did not learn he had been sued until he tried to use his Nationwide account in December 2024.

As stated above, they used a Hotmail address that Tattle Life had previously listed as its point of contact, which was no longer in use by 2023. But even then, they did not send the documents as attachments to the email, but only a link to a Mimecast cloud website, along with a message saying that to click on this would allow access to papers setting out a case against “persons unknown operating under the pseudonym Tattle Life”, and to allow them to be downloaded. It is fair to say, as Bond notes, that many people would assume that such an email was a scam. In any event, he did not notice it.

The way Mimecast works means Gateley’s and the Sands would have received an automatic notification if the documents had been downloaded. However, they were not. Moreover, the link expired on 28th July 2023. After that date, Bond could not have downloaded the documents, even if he had tried. Yet when the Sands went back to court on 8th September, their lawyers told Mr Justice McAlinden that Tattle Life “has *chosen* [my italics] not to reveal the true identity of the person/s behind it” – implying the persons unknown had made a conscious decision to ignore the lawsuit.

**Conclusion**

This is a murky tale of a couple using the courts to suppress posts about themselves on a website they disliked. For Sebastian Bond, the owner

of that site, this was worse than being served with a common-or-garden SLAPP because he was not served at all. Consequently, he did not have a proper opportunity to face his accusers in court or even to submit a defence, and the first he knew of the judgement against him was when he was unable to withdraw money from one of his bank accounts. Moreover, he did not know he was being sued because the court was misled, having been told that the claimants did not know his identity, even though there is ample evidence they did.

This was an egregious miscarriage of justice, and the FSU is glad to have played a part in overturning it. It serves as a cautionary tale about how the courts can be weaponised by the rich and powerful to silence their critics.

**Timeline**

**April 2023 –** Data leak from Tattle Life's hoster Xenforo reveals to the Sands that Sebastian Bond is the man behind Tattle Life.

**26th May 2023 –** Nardello and Co's private investigator calls on Bond at home in Poole and confirms his identity.

**6th June 2023 –** Nardello report sets out links between Bond and Tattle Life, includes his personal email address and details of his life.

**23rd June 2023 –** Ahead of the claim being issued, Mr Justice Friedman says it can be served anonymously against persons unknown with a ban on reporting because the Sands do not know who is behind Tattle Life.

**28th June 2023 –** Sands issue their claim by sending a Mimecast link to an old Tattle Life Hotmail address. The documents are never downloaded.

**23rd August 2023 –** Further Nardello report includes fresh details and says there is a "high degree of certainty" that Bond runs Tattle Life.

**8th September 2023 –** Mr Justice McAlinden issues default judgment. The Sands and their lawyers say nothing about Bond, claiming their investigations are ongoing. They tell the court the unknown persons have "chosen" not to respond to the lawsuit.

**1st December 2023 –** Same judge awards the maximum possible £300,000 damages and costs against the unknown persons. Still no mention of Bond.

**9th December 2024 –** Sands reveal that Bond owns Tattle Life and get an order freezing his worldwide assets to a value of £1.8 million. Reporting

ban stays in force.

**13th June 2025 –** Sands asks the court to lift the reporting ban, then go on a media offensive. Bond finally discovers why he can't access his money.

**15th June 2025 –** Sands' lawyers serve the mountain of legal documents accumulated to date to Bond – using the personal email address that they have had for more than two years but never used.

**June 2025 – March 2026** Protracted legal battle by Bond and his lawyers, RPC, supported by the FSU, to get the judgment set aside on the basis that the Sands and their team have failed in their duty of candour.

**6th March 2026 –** disclosure of previously unseen documents concludes with apology to the Northern Ireland High Court, Sebastian Bond and the Sands' own KC by their lead solicitor, Gateley's head of reputation management, Rory Lynch.

**5th May 2026 – Judgment** by Mr Justice Humphreys in the High Court of Northern Ireland setting aside the original judgment.

FSU

FREE SPEECH UNION