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PERSON IN THE NEWS

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## Charles Harder, Hollywood's favourite lawyer

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### Litigator of Hulk Hogan and Melania Trump has been thrust into the limelight



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Hulk Hogan and Melania Trump make strange bedfellows. But what the pro wrestler and wife of the US Republican presidential nominee have in common is a sharp entertainment lawyer in Charles Harder.

Mr Harder counts among his clients the megawatt Hollywood actors George Clooney, Bradley Cooper, Sandra Bullock and Clint Eastwood. He has kept their names off products they were not paid to endorse, from movie projectors to watches.

Now the litigator is at the centre of two high-profile cases that have thrust him into the limelight normally enjoyed by his clients. This week Gawker Media closed down its flagship gossip website after losing a \$140m judgment to Mr Hogan, whose real name is Terry Bollea. Mr Bollea hired Mr Harder to sue Gawker for invasion of privacy after it posted a clip from a sex tape involving the wrestler. The verdict has reverberated through the media world. It has also stoked broader debates about litigation funding and press freedom after it was revealed that Mr Bollea's lawsuit was funded by Peter Thiel, the Silicon Valley billionaire, who has had his own run-ins with Gawker.

Mr Harder says he understands the debate. "There are legitimate concerns," he told the Financial Times. "People want . . . to make sure that their government, and their journalists, or other important institutions aren't bought and

paid for. Journalists want to feel comfortable reporting the truth about matters of legitimate public concern without fear of being sued for it. I get that. “But,” he added, “a free press is not unlimited . . . You can’t defame somebody. You can’t post surreptitiously recorded sex tapes of people against their consent . . . If these things were permissible, we would have a very different world.”

The success of Mr Harder’s case against Gawker is no doubt what caught the attention of Donald Trump. His wife, a former model, retained Mr Harder after the Daily Mail of the UK and others published reports this week “making false and defamatory statements about her supposedly being an ‘escort’ in the 1990s”, Mr Harder said. Letters were sent to news organisations warning of legal action. His victory over Gawker has reverberated through the media world, stoking debates on press freedom.

Mr Harder, a 46-year-old native of Encino, a wealthy neighbourhood in Los Angeles, was raised by his father, a financial consultant, and his mother, who stayed at home and took care of him and his brother. After secondary school, he volunteered at Rocky Mountain National Park where he suffered from a sore back from digging irrigation ditches for three weeks. When he started at the University of California, Santa Cruz, the politics bug bit him. He joined the student council and became a liaison with the town, which coveted the student voting bloc. That led to an internship with a local assemblyman. After graduating with a degree in politics, Mr Harder worked for a liberal Democrat in the state senate, and championed a bill mandating the government to buy recycled paint and motor oil.

To further his career in politics, Mr Harder enrolled in law school. But saddled with loans, he decided to make his way as a lawyer. After a year as a clerk for a federal judge he joined a small litigation firm in Orange County where he worked for clients as diverse as Walt Disney and property developers. He then moved to Lavelly & Singer, an LA entertainment boutique law firm, before being lured, at the height of the dotcom bubble, to Load Media Network, an online video website, where he was general counsel. On the night before his wedding, Mr Harder received a phone call informing him that all the employees were being let go. He and his wife extended their honeymoon. He returned to Lavelly & Singer and then, after seven years, left for Wolf, Rifkin, Shapiro, Schulman & Rabkin, where he continued to represent celebrities in disputes.

It was in October 2012 that Gawker posted the video of Mr Bollea. David Houston, Mr Hogan’s personal lawyer, asked Gawker to remove it. When the publisher refused, Mr Houston called Mr Harder, who filed a lawsuit against Gawker and its founder. Mr Harder and two friends opened their own law firm taking the Gawker lawsuit with them. Nearly three and a half years later, Mr Harder’s quest against Gawker continues. The company, which was recently sold to Univision for \$135m out of bankruptcy, is appealing the judgment and damages. Mr Harder is representing in lawsuits two other individuals — not backed by Mr Thiel — who were subjects of Gawker articles.

Mr Harder will not say how Mrs Trump became his client. Mr Thiel spoke at the Republican national convention when Mr Trump was named the party’s nominee but Mr Harder says: “To the best of my knowledge, there is no connection between the two.”

As he has his 15 minutes of fame, it seems unlikely that he will be able to keep the low profile he has long coveted. Mr Harder does not attend red carpet events, award shows or Hollywood parties, preferring pot luck dinners with family friends. This weekend, Mr Harder will try enjoying some anonymity in the glitzy playground of Las Vegas, where he is reuniting with friends to drink beer and pick their fantasy American football teams.

*The writer is the FT’s investigations correspondent.*