

Fox News allegedly made fake news to protect Trump

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The private investigator who investigated the unsolved murder of Democratic National Committee aide Seth Rich claimed in a lawsuit Tuesday that a Fox News reporter put words in his mouth to create a fake news story.

Rod Wheeler claims Fox's Malia Zimmerman made up two quotes attributed to him in her May 16 story, which implied that Rich was killed for leaking internal DNC emails to Wikileaks.

"Mr. Wheeler — who was the only named source quoted in the article — did not make these statements," the lawsuit states.

Wheeler, a former Washington, D.C. detective and sometime Fox News contributor, said he complained to Ed Butowsky, the Trump supporter who hired him to probe the killing of the DNC data analyst, and was told "that is the way the President wanted the article."

"The motivation" for the Rich article was to divert attention away from the ongoing Russia investigation and "help put to bed speculation that President Trump colluded with Russia in an attempt to influence the outcome of the Presidential election," Wheeler said in his federal lawsuit, which was filed in the Southern District of New York.

"Zimmerman, Butowsky and Fox had created fake news to advance President Trump's agenda," the suit states. "Mr. Wheeler was subsequently forced to correct the false record and, as a result, lost all credibility in the eyes of the public."

Butowsky did not return a call from NBC News for comment. But in an interview with MSNBC contributor Gabriel Sherman, he dismissed the Wheeler lawsuit with an expletive and denied sharing the Fox article with the White House.

"I've never spoken to Trump in my life," he said.

Asked about the allegations, Fox's president of news Jay Wallace released the following statement:

"The accusation that FoxNews.com published Malia Zimmerman's story to help detract from coverage of the Russia collusion issue is completely erroneous. The retraction of this story is still being investigated internally and we have no evidence that Rod Wheeler was misquoted by Zimmerman. Additionally, FOX News vehemently denies the race discrimination claims in the lawsuit — the dispute between Zimmerman and Rod Wheeler had nothing to do with race."

Fox News [retracted Zimmerman's story](#) a week after it was published, but not before the report caught fire with Trump supporters, who called it proof that the Russians were not behind the DNC breach as U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies believe.

Wheeler, who is African-American, also claims he was discriminated against by Fox because of his race and is seeking unspecified damages.

Wheeler's lawyer is Douglas Wigdor, who is representing several other [former Fox News workers](#) who have filed lawsuits against the network alleging discrimination, sexual harassment and other workplace

issues.

Butowsky, a Dallas-based financial adviser, is also a Fox News contributor. After Rich was murdered in July 2016, in what Washington D.C. police believe was a botched robbery, he urged the Rich family to hire Wheeler and offered to pick up the tab, [according to a spokesman for the Rich family](#).

But after Wheeler was quoted by Zimmerman saying there was evidence to support the theory that Rich had been in contact with WikiLeaks before his death, the Rich family [distanced itself](#) from the private investigator.

Responding to the Wheeler lawsuit, family spokesman Brad Bauman said in a statement: “While we can’t speak to the evidence that you now have, we are hopeful that this brings an end to what has been the most emotionally difficult time in our lives and an end to the conspiracy theories surrounding our beloved Seth.”

Wheeler also claims in his lawsuit he and Butowsky met with then-White House spokesman Sean Spicer on April 20 “and provided him with a copy of Mr. Wheeler’s investigative notes.”

“Mr. Spicer asked to be kept abreast of developments and, upon information and belief, Butowsky did keep Mr. Spicer abreast of developments.”

Butowsky was also in “regular contact” with White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon and Department of Justice spokeswoman Sarah Isgur Flores “regarding his efforts relating to Seth Rich,” the suit states.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders insisted Tuesday they were not involved in the Fox News story about Rich. “The president didn’t have knowledge of this story, the White House didn’t have any involvement in this story and beyond that, it’s ongoing litigation that doesn’t involve anybody in the building and so I’d refer you to the parties that it does,” she said at the daily press briefing.

Reached by telephone, Spicer confirmed he had a “ten-minute” meeting with Butowsky and Wheeler in White House on April 20.

“As I said, Ed has been a longtime supporter of President Trump,” Spicer told NBC News. “They came in and told me about the story they were working on for Fox.”

Spicer also confirmed what he told NPR, which broke the [Wheeler lawsuit story](#).

“There was no talk about the president’s agenda,” he said. “They were just informing me about the story.”

Huckabee Sanders saw no issue with Spicer taking the meeting. “It doesn’t bother me that the press secretary would take a meeting with someone involved in the media about a story.”

Wheeler in the lawsuit produced a May 14 text from Butowsky in which he said “the president just read the article.”

“He wants the article out immediately,” he allegedly wrote.

Spicer said he did not know if Butowsky had any direct contact with the president.

DNC spokeswoman Xochitl Hinojosa also weighed-in on the Wheeler lawsuit.

“If these allegations are true, it is beyond vile that the White House — and possibly even Trump himself — would use the murder of a young man to distract the public’s attention from their chaotic administration and

Trump's ties to Russia," she said.