



Rod Wheeler, a private detective, speaking on the Fox News program "Hannity" in May about his investigation of the death of Seth Rich, a Democratic National Committee aide. Credit Fox

The private detective at the center of a Fox News article about the death of a young Democratic aide claims that the White House and a wealthy Trump supporter urged the network to publish the article as part of a scheme to blunt speculation about the president's ties to Russia, according to a lawsuit filed Tuesday.

Rod Wheeler, who was hired by the family of the aide, Seth Rich, to look into his death, filed the lawsuit against Fox News and its parent company, 21st Century Fox, accusing the network of fabricating

quotations from him in [an article on FoxNews.com](#). Mr. Wheeler states that the network was aware that he had not said the statements yet it published them "with reckless disregard for their truth."

The network later [retracted the article](#), saying it did not meet its standards.

In the suit, Mr. Wheeler, who is a Fox News contributor, asserts that he was a pawn in a broader plan by the White House, a Trump supporter named Ed Butowsky and Fox News to "shift the blame from Russia and help put to bed speculation that President Trump colluded with Russia in an attempt to influence the outcome of the presidential election." The lawsuit, alleging defamation and racial discrimination, was filed Tuesday morning in the United States District Court in the Southern District of New York.

Mr. Rich, who worked for the [Democratic National Committee](#), was fatally shot in July 2016. The case is unsolved. The retracted article, citing law enforcement sources, said Mr. Rich had shared thousands of D.N.C. emails with WikiLeaks — a theory that would undercut the assertions that Russia had interfered in the election on behalf of Mr. Trump.

Mr. Wheeler, who is black, states in the suit that he has faced discrimination at Fox News because of his race. Mr. Wheeler, who is paid a set amount for each appearance he makes on the network, says that he has received less airtime, money and notoriety than his white colleagues.

Jay Wallace, the president of news at Fox News, said in a 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 has nothing to do with race," Mr. Wallace added.

The development comes as Fox News and 21st Century Fox have attempted to move past a sexual harassment scandal that burst into public view last year and led to the ouster of Roger Ailes, the network's founding chairman; Bill O'Reilly, the prominent anchor; and several other employees. Yet the issue [has](#)

[emerged in other divisions](#) at the company and has cast a shadow over its \$15 billion bid for Sky, the European satellite giant.

In June, British authorities ruled that Rupert Murdoch, who is executive chairman of 21st Century Fox, and other company executives were “fit and proper” to hold broadcasting licenses in Britain, even as they concluded that the sexual harassment scandal at Fox News had amounted to “significant corporate failures.”

Douglas Wigdor, a lawyer for Mr. Wheeler, pointed out how Fox News published the Seth Rich article in the same time period that 21st Century Fox executives were meeting with British regulators about the Sky deal.

“At the same time that 21st Century Fox’s general counsel, Gerson Zweifach, was meeting with the U.K. regulators in an attempt to convince them that Fox had in place procedures to ensure compliance with broadcasting standards to purchase Sky, Fox News was working with the Trump administration to disseminate fake news in order to distract the public from Russia’s alleged attempts to influence our country’s presidential election,” said Mr. Wigdor, who also represents [several current and former Fox News employees](#) who have made sexual and racial harassment complaints against the network. (His firm also represents clients in a racial discrimination suit against The New York Times.)

In the complaint, Mr. Wheeler states that Ms. Zimmerman, worked closely with Mr. Butowsky, a Trump supporter and occasional Fox News commentator who pushed a fake article to advance the president’s agenda. The suit states that in April, Mr. Butowsky met with Sean Spicer, the president’s first press secretary, about the investigation into the death of Mr. Rich.

In a statement, Mr. Spicer said: “Ed is a longtime supporter of the president’s agenda. He requested a 10-minute meeting to catch up.” In an [interview with NPR](#), Mr. Spicer said: “It had nothing to do with advancing the president’s domestic agenda — and there was no agenda. They were just informing me of the story.”

Mr. Wheeler cites a text message and voice mail from Mr. Butowsky as evidence that President Trump had reviewed the article before its publication and supported it. According to the suit, a text message from Mr. Butowsky on May 14 read: “Not to add any more pressure but the president just read the article. He wants the article out immediately. It’s now all up to you. But don’t feel the pressure.”

Mr. Wheeler said that he was falsely quoted in the article published on May 16 as stating that his investigation found “some degree of email exchange between Seth Rich and WikiLeaks” and that his investigation showed “someone within the D.C. government, Democratic National Committee or Clinton team is blocking the murder investigation from going forward.”

Mr. Wheeler said Fox News, Mr. Butowsky and Ms. Zimmerman knew that the quotations were fabricated. He said that even though Fox News retracted the article, it did not clear his name or admit that he had been misquoted and that his “reputation as an objective, credible and intelligent investigator with integrity was completely destroyed.”

Ms. Zimmerman and Mr. Butowsky, who are also defendants in the suit, could not immediately be reached for comment.

In a statement, the family of Mr. Rich said: “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 conspiracy theories surrounding our beloved Seth.”

