

# The strange case of Fox News, Trump and the death of young Democrat Seth Rich

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In the early hours of Sunday 10 July 2016, Seth Rich, a 27-year-old digital campaigner with the Democratic National Committee, was walking home after a long night at his favorite Washington sports bar, Lou's City. He was in no hurry, chatting for more than two hours on the phone to his girlfriend. At 4.19am, he told her he was almost at his door and had to go.

Seconds later, gunshots rang out. A minute after that, police arrived to find Rich lying on the ground just a block from his apartment, still alive but fading fast, with two bullet wounds in his back. He died in hospital a few hours later.

It was the tragic end to the life of a [popular man](#) with strawberry blond hair and a taste for wearing stars and stripes shirts on the Fourth of July. But it was only the beginning of an even more tragic afterlife: the ruthless [exploitation of his death](#) for political purposes by the hard right, from Fox News, Breitbart, and Roger Stone to Newt Gingrich, along with Julian Assange of WikiLeaks and the farther flung reaches of the internet.

Last week, the conspiracy theory that conservatives draped around Rich's lifeless neck – that he was the source of the hacked DNC emails released by WikiLeaks at the height of the 2016 presidential race, and not Russia, as US intelligence [insists](#) – was revealed to have received a boost from the highest quarter. The former White House press secretary Sean Spicer, and allegedly even Donald Trump himself, were [revealed to have](#) been given advance notice of a sensational Fox News story that blamed Rich for the hack, and implied he had been murdered by Clinton acolytes as payback.

The only problem with the [Fox](#) story: it wasn't true.

The blockbuster revelation that Fox News made pre-publication contact with the White House over a malicious and false story blaming a murdered young man for the DNC emails spells potential trouble for both parties. For Fox News, it revives the charge made over many years that its owner, [Rupert Murdoch](#), is prepared to be cavalier with journalistic ethics if it suits his political or corporate interests.

It has also resurfaced memories of the phone-hacking of missing schoolgirl [Milly Dowler](#) by the News of the World, Murdoch's UK tabloid flagship that was closed in the wake of the scandal. The allegations are toxic at a time when 21st Century Fox is awaiting the British government's decision on its £11.7bn (\$15.3bn) takeover of satellite broadcaster Sky.

For Trump, the disclosures threaten to punch a hole in one of the central pillars of his presidency: his assault against the "fake news" of the mainstream media. Here he stands, charged with egging on [Fox News](#) to publish a fabricated story in order to draw public attention away from his own travails over Russia.

Douglas Wigdor, the New York-based lawyer behind the bombshell [lawsuit](#) from which this week's revelations come, points to key evidence contained in the complaint involving Ed Butowsky, a Fox News contributor and wealthy Texan Republican donor. Butowsky had taken it upon himself to investigate the death of Rich, and much of the lawsuit deals with what he said in text messages and audio recordings about his dealings with the White House.

"Assuming that what Butowsky said was true, the president has been involved in creating fake news, and

that would be very significant and troubling,” Wigdor told the Guardian. “You have the US president helping the media to shape a narrative that wasn’t true – that’s reminiscent of Soviet-type state control of the media.”

At the heart of the case is the [16 May article](#) published by Fox News under the headline: “Seth Rich, slain DNC staffer, had contact with WikiLeaks”. By that time the Rich conspiracy was flying high on the internet, fueled in no small part by the teasing innuendos of Assange, who for his own perhaps Clinton-hating reasons offered a \$20,000 reward for information on the murder, and by the Republican dirty tricks-meister Roger Stone, who proclaimed without producing evidence that Rich had been killed on his way to meet the FBI.

But the Fox News article, which the broadcaster retracted a week later, took the conspiracy to a new level by claiming to have solid intelligence pointing to Rich as the source of the [WikiLeaks](#) DNC emails.

That intelligence purportedly came from a former Washington DC detective, Fox contributor Rod Wheeler. He has now turned against the network and is the plaintiff in Wigdor’s lawsuit. He alleges that quotes put in his mouth in the Fox News article were fabricated.

Two quotes in particular Wheeler alleges were entirely made up, both of them key to the article’s message. In them he claims to have knowledge of contact between Rich and WikiLeaks, and that Clinton associates blocked the inquiry into the young man’s murder.

After the lawsuit was lodged in a New York federal court on Tuesday, Fox News issued a defense in which it said “we have no evidence that Rod Wheeler was misquoted”. The Guardian invited Fox to turn that on its head: did they have any evidence that Wheeler had been correctly quoted?

The reply came swiftly: “Fox News has retained outside counsel on the matter. Given that this is pending litigation, there will be no further comment.”

David Folkenflik, the NPR media correspondent who [broke the story of the lawsuit](#), said he detected shades of Milly Dowler here, with the distinction that News of the World’s phone hacking of the teenager had been motivated by paper sales while the Seth Rich affair is far more political. Either way, he said: “Rupert Murdoch has been in this place before, where he has to decide how much he wants his outlets to be serious news organisations or not.”

Folkenflik, a Murdoch biographer, added that the lawsuit exposed a degree of interaction between Fox News and the White House that was highly irregular. “They seemed to be riding a motorcycle and side-car strapped together for the trip,” he said.

### **‘The president just read the article’**

Wigdor’s lawsuit makes extremely uncomfortable reading for Trump. Spicer, the president’s former press secretary who [resigned](#) last month, [confirmed](#) to NPR that he was informed about the Fox story a month before it was posted, undercutting his own statement to the press on the day of publication that he was “not aware” of the story.

We now know Spicer had a meeting in the White House with Wheeler and Butowsky in April, which is exceptional in itself. But the lawsuit goes further, allegedly implicating Trump himself.

Page one of the suit reproduces a text from Butowsky to Wheeler. “The president just read the article,” it reads. “He wants the article out immediately.”

Butowsky claims he was joking, and the White House has denied any involvement. But the sequence of events is certainly curious.

The fabricated Fox News story was published two days after Butowsky sent that text about Trump wanting the article out “immediately”. That week, the president was being assailed on all sides about his relations with Russia.

The day before publication, it was [revealed](#) that Trump had spilled classified secrets about Islamic State to the Russian ambassador in the Oval Office. A [memo](#) by then FBI director James Comey emerged in which Trump pressured him to close the investigation into his former national security adviser Michael Flynn. And the Russia probe was [reported](#) to have its fangs into a serving official in the White House, later disclosed to be Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner.

If ever there was a week to release fake news deflecting the DNC hack away from Russia and Trump and on to the shoulders of an uninvolved, innocent – and dead – young man, then this was it.

One of the emerging themes of the Trump era has been the thickening bond between the president and Murdoch. Though the now 86-year-old media tycoon was wary of Trump in the early days of the 2016 race – preferring more traditional conservatives such as Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio – he ditched any qualms as soon as the reality TV celebrity’s ascendancy was certain. He is [reported](#) to have conferred with the president regularly.

Fox News has also carved out an ample path to the White House. Last week the channel’s star commentator, Sean Hannity, a champion of the Seth Rich conspiracy theory, dined with Trump, fellow Fox anchor Kimberly Guilfoyle, former Fox News executive Bill Shine and then White House communications chief Anthony Scaramucci. (It was the [leak](#) of that encounter, incidentally, that so incensed “the Mooch” that he made the foul-mouthed tirade that contributed to his being fired just 10 days into the job.)

To complete the Fox News-Oval Office lovefest, Shine, who was forced out over the handling of the network’s sexual harassment allegations, is reportedly [in the running](#) to replace Scaramucci.

It seems the lawsuit released last week exposing the cosy relationship between Fox News and the White House in the creation of fake news might have hit a nerve. Whether Trump and Murdoch heed its warning remains to be seen.