

Fox Is Sued Over Ex-Panelist's Claim That Anchor Raped Her

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September 18, 2017, 9:37 PM EDT

A former Fox News panelist claims in a lawsuit that she was raped by a longtime anchor of one of the network's programs and her complaint was ignored by the company.

Fox News called the lawsuit a "publicity stunt" that has no merit and "is downright shameful." Charles Payne, the host of "Making Money" on Fox Business, whom Scottie Nell Hughes accused of the assault, called the complaint baseless.

Hughes claims after she reported Payne's July 2013 assault to an outside law firm investigating sexual harassment at the network in late June, she became a victim of a public relations smear campaign.

Her name was leaked to the National Enquirer and the tabloid was given a "self-serving statement," allegedly drafted by Payne, in which he expressed his sorrow at having engaged in an affair with Hughes, according to the complaint.

"Fox's belief that its spin about an affair would somehow negate Ms. Hughes's sexual assault claims speaks volumes about Fox's ignorance about sexual violence against women," her lawyers said in a footnote of the complaint.

Payne's lawyer, Jonathan N. Halpern, said his client denies any wrongdoing.

"We are confident that when the evidence is presented in this case, Mr. Payne will be fully vindicated and these outrageous accusations against him will be confirmed as completely false," Halpern said in an emailed statement Monday.

Payne was suspended by Fox in July pending an investigation of a sexual harassment claim against him. He was reinstated on Sept. 8.

The lawsuit was filed in Manhattan federal court Monday by New York lawyer Douglas Wigdor, who represents about two dozen current and former employees suing the network for illegal discrimination and sexual harassment.

It adds to claims that have forced out some of Fox's highest-rated talent and executives. The lawsuits also adds to pressure on the parent company, 21st Century Fox Inc., as it's trying to persuade U.K. regulators to allow a \$15.5 billion takeover of Sky Plc to go ahead. Last week, the U.K. government referred the bid for Sky to a wider probe by the country's competition authority.

"It's worth noting that Doug is Ms. Hughes' third representative in the last six months to raise some variation of these claims which concern events from four years ago, since it apparently took some time to find someone to file this bogus case," Fox News said in the emailed statement Monday.

Wigdor responded that the representatives Fox referred to included Hughes's agent and a lawyer not admitted in New York. "The suggestion that Ms. Hughes was shopping for a lawyer is yet another desperate attempt at avoiding the real issues and blaming the victim," he said in an emailed statement.

Hughes claims in the complaint that when she discussed the sexual assault and rape with the company's outside lawyers, they suggested a "business solution" was preferable to a formal investigation because that would open "a can of worms."

After a business solution was rejected by Fox, "mysteriously, personal emails between Payne and Ms. Hughes that suggested a consensual relationship found their way into the public," according to the lawsuit. "However painful it is to expose the fact that she is a rape victim, and knowing the Fox PR machine will follow through with its threats to reveal more personal emails, Ms. Hughes cannot allow Fox to victimize her a second time by trampling on her reputation."

Hughes is seeking unspecified damages and an order for Fox to put her in the position she would have occupied if not for the retaliation and discrimination.

Wigdor met with Ofcom, the U.K. regulator, and provided details of some of his clients' complaints. He also complained that Fox Chief Executive Officer James Murdoch and Co-Chairman Lachlan Murdoch failed to disclose to the regulator facts surrounding the publication of a discredited news story that's a subject of a separate lawsuit.

The case is *Hughes v. Twenty-First Century Fox Inc.*, 17-cv-07093, U.S. District Court, Southern District of New York (Manhattan).