

Political commentator Scottie Nell Hughes accused Fox anchor of rape, claims name was leaked as retaliation

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by Rob McLean and Dylan Byers

In a suit filed Monday in federal court in New York, Hughes says she had taken her accusations against Payne to Fox and law firm Paul Weiss, which conducted internal investigations for Fox in the wake of a string of sexual harassment allegations.

The suit, which names Fox News parent 21st Century Fox ([FOX](#)) as a defendant, claims that Hughes believes Fox spokesperson Irena Briganti leaked her name to the National Enquirer as retaliation, knowing she "was a victim of a violent sexual assault."

"Despicably, Fox leaked Ms. Hughes's identity to the National Enquirer at the same time that it emailed a self-serving 'statement,' purportedly drafted by Payne, that expressed his sorrow at having engaged in what he described as an affair with Ms. Hughes," according to the suit.

Briganti, who is also named in the lawsuit, did not comment.

Hughes is represented by Douglas Wigdor, who has represented other women in harassment allegations against Fox News.

Fox News, in a statement, dismissed the lawsuit as "shameful" and "bogus."

"The latest publicity stunt of a lawsuit filed by Doug Wigdor has absolutely no merit and is downright shameful. We will vigorously defend this," Fox News said.

Wigdor countered that statement by saying, "Fox cannot spin its way out of this crisis -- especially when only Fox is to blame for what happened."

"Regardless of the fact that the sexual assault and rape, as alleged, happened in 2013, the events exposing Fox's liability exposure (as opposed to Payne) occurred less than 2 months ago when Fox Executives at the highest levels leaked Ms. Hughes's name to a tabloid," Wigdor said.

Jonathan Halpern, an attorney who represents Payne, said Payne 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.

Earlier this month, Payne [returned to Fox Business Network](#) after his suspension in early July. An internal investigation into the allegations was completed, a Fox spokesperson said.

Fox Business Network suspended Payne in July of 2017 on suspicion of "professional misconduct" after Hughes' allegations. Earlier this month, [Payne returned to the network](#). An internal investigation into the allegations was completed, a Fox spokesperson said.

It's been more than a year since former Fox News host Gretchen Carlson sent shock waves through the network by suing then-CEO Roger Ailes. She accused him of firing her after she refused his "sexual advances."

Others at Fox News later came forward with similar claims, and Ailes left the company on July 21, 2016. Ailes died in May 2017.

Reports also first surfaced last fall that more sexual harassment allegations were being aimed at longtime Fox News star Bill O'Reilly. O'Reilly consistently denied the allegations, but was eventually fired from the network.