

Trump Linked To Fox News' Bogus Seth Rich Story, Lawsuit Alleges

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The White House was briefed in advance about a [baseless Fox News report](#) claiming murdered Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich provided documents to WikiLeaks, according to a new lawsuit that also alleges President [Donald Trump](#) encouraged the article's publication.

Rod Wheeler, an ex-police detective, private investigator and paid Fox News commentator, made the allegations in a suit filed against the network, parent company 21st Century Fox, Fox News reporter Malia Zimmerman and Trump supporter Ed Butowsky.

In the lawsuit, [first reported by NPR](#), Wheeler alleged that Zimmerman fabricated quotes as she and Butowsky worked to advance "a political agenda for the Trump administration."

Wheeler, who said he was approached by Butowsky in February and later retained by the Rich family to investigate the murder, alleged that he never told Zimmerman he found evidence of an email exchange between Rich and WikiLeaks or that powerful entities were impeding the police investigation into the young staffer's death in July 2016.

The erroneous claims about communications between Rich and WikiLeaks first surfaced on May 15, when a Fox affiliate in Washington, D.C., ran a report. The quotes also appeared the next day in Zimmerman's since-retracted article on Fox News' website.

On Tuesday afternoon, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump "had no knowledge of this story" and that it was "completely untrue" that the White House was involved in it.

Sanders acknowledged that her predecessor, Sean Spicer, met with Wheeler and Butowsky prior to publication, but dismissed the significance of the White House discussion. (Spicer [indicated he was "not aware"](#) of the Rich story when asked about it on May 16.) The press secretary also said she was "not sure" if Trump believed that Rich was WikiLeaks' source — the crux of Fox News' retracted story.

The U.S. intelligence community has concluded that Russian hackers stole documents from the DNC, but many Trump supporters have pushed the [bogus conspiracy theory](#) about Rich to distract from investigations into whether Trump allies colluded with Russia during the 2016 campaign.

"The accusation that FoxNews.com published Malia Zimmerman's story to help detract from coverage of the Russia collusion issue is completely erroneous," Jay Wallace, president of news for Fox News, said in a statement. "The retraction of this story is still being investigated internally and we have no evidence that Rod Wheeler was misquoted by Zimmerman."

Zimmerman's report, which attributed information to an unnamed source and Wheeler, spread quickly in conservative media and was amplified by pro-Trump shows like "Fox & Friends" and "Hannity." Host Sean Hannity [continued](#) discussing the Rich story even after Fox News retracted Zimmerman's report.

Wheeler's lawsuit sheds light on how the story was handled inside Fox News. It includes an email Butowsky sent to "Fox & Friends" co-hosts the night before Zimmerman's story was published, in which he suggested how to frame the story for Trump's benefit.

"One of the big conclusions we need to draw from this is that the Russians did not hack our computer systems and steal emails and there was no collusion like trump with the Russians," Butowsky wrote,

according to the lawsuit.

Wheeler also claims that the White House was briefed on Zimmerman's story and that Trump pushed for the piece to be published immediately after reading a draft.

Butowsky told Wheeler in a May 14 text message that Trump "just read the article" and "wants the article out immediately." Butowsky acknowledged sending the text to Wheeler, but told NPR it had been a joke.

The rush to publish the story was playing out as Trump faced increased scrutiny over firing FBI Director James Comey on May 9. The president later admitted he had made that decision at least partly in response to the agency's ongoing investigation into allegations of that his associates had colluded with Russia.

According to the lawsuit, Butowsky and Zimmerman told Wheeler on May 10 that they had an FBI source saying Rich sent emails to WikiLeaks.

The still-unpublished Fox News story had the "full attention of the White House" and they needed to "close the deal, whatever we've got to do," Butowsky told Wheeler in a voicemail on May 14, according to the suit.

The Fox affiliate story came out on May 15 and Wheeler cited a "source" during an interview that same day to bolster the Rich conspiracy. According to the suit, Wheeler was referring to Zimmerman's supposed source and not to anyone who had confirmed the claims independently to him. Zimmerman's story was published on May 16 and retracted a week later.

Wheeler [appeared on "Hannity"](#) on the night of May 16 and did not dispute the quotes attributed to him. He admitted to not personally seeing any emails between Rich and WikiLeaks, but said there was a "very credible" federal investigator backing up the claim. Wheeler said that based on his experience as an investigator, it "appears" Rich and WikiLeaks communicated.

Skepticism should be applied to Wheeler's claims in the lawsuit. However, the White House and Butowsky are not disputing significant aspects of it, even if they are downplaying their significance.

Spicer told NPR that he met with Butowsky as a favor to the president's supporter and said he wasn't aware of Trump being involved in the process. "It had nothing to do with advancing the president's domestic agenda — and there was no agenda," Spicer told NPR. "They were just informing me of the [Fox] story."

Wheeler also met with Sarah Isgur Flores, the Department of Justice's director of public affairs, on April 19, but that meeting "did not concern Seth Rich," according to the lawsuit. However, the suit alleges that Butowsky told Wheeler he was in regular contact with Flores before publication and claimed in a text message that he knew her well.

"She [Ms. Flores] knows me well," Butowsky wrote to Wheeler, according to the suit. "Tell her I said hello. Let her know why I was calling her, Seth Rich. Ask her to keep it quiet because we don't know...who the good or the bad people are anymore. But we know she's one of the really good ones."

Flores disputed the claim. "I have not communicated with Mr. Butowsky at any point this year," she told HuffPost.

The lawsuit describes Wheeler as having "lost all credibility in the eyes of the public" as a result of Fox News' handling of the Rich story.

Wheeler, who is black, is also alleging racial discrimination at the network. Wallace said in his statement that “FOX News vehemently denies the race discrimination claims in the lawsuit — the dispute between Zimmerman and Rod Wheeler has nothing to do with race.”

Attorney Douglas Wigdor, who is [representing](#) other current and former Fox News staffers claiming racial bias in separate suits, has [also opposed](#) parent company 21st Century Fox’s takeover bid of British broadcaster Sky News because there have been several recent sexual harassment and racial discrimination suits against the network.

In a statement, Wigdor said that as 21st Century Fox was trying to convince regulators in the United Kingdom that the company upheld broadcasting standards, “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.”

Democratic National Committee communications director Xochitl Hinojosa said that if the 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.”

“The Rich family has begged those responsible for these conspiracies to stop,” she added. “And yet, Trump’s allies have ignored their pain and their pleas, degrading the office of the president by spreading repulsive lies.”