

Lawsuit claims the White House knew about fake Fox News story about Seth Rich

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The White House knew about and encouraged the publication of a fake news story in May about the 2016 murder of Democratic National Committee staffer Seth Rich, according to a new [lawsuit](#) filed against Fox News.

The suit, filed by Rod Wheeler, a private investigator who regularly appears on Fox News, claimed the channel coordinated a meeting with then-press secretary Sean Spicer and gave President Donald Trump an advance copy of the article, [according to an exclusive NPR report Tuesday](#).

Wheeler sued the channel, one of its reporters and a Trump supporter he argued defamed him in the wake of a May 16 story claiming Rich was connected to the DNC email hacks that helped to take down Hillary Clinton's campaign. In the suit, Wheeler said Fox News made up quotes for the story, which was all part of a distraction plot.

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"Rod Wheeler, unfortunately, was used as a pawn by Ed Butowsky, Fox News and the Trump administration to try and steer away the attention that was being given about the Russian hacking of the DNC emails," Wheeler's lawyer, Douglas Wigdor, told NPR.

Rich, 27, was fatally shot last summer in Washington, D.C. in what police described as a botched robbery. Because his death came right before WikiLeaks published a trove of DNC emails, it sparked a number of right-wing conspiracy theories, including the one at the center of the May 16 article in question. Fox News would later [retract the story](#) after pleas from the family, but Wheeler's lawsuit focuses on what happened before the article's publication.

Wheeler's lawsuit alleged that Butowsky, an investment strategist who supports Trump, worked with Fox News' Malia Zimmerman to create the fake news story—with the president's knowledge. The lawsuit said Wheeler, whose investigation into the murder Butowsky offered to finance, met with Spicer at the White House in April. And before the story went live, Butowsky sent Wheeler a text message saying "the president just read the article. He wants the article out immediately." He also left a voicemail telling Wheeler "the White House is onto this now."

But Butowsky told NPR he was just kidding about the president's involvement. Spicer told NPR he only met with the men as a favor, and he didn't know of any communication between Trump and Butowsky.

As NPR pointed out, the story went national on May 16—just days after Trump fired FBI director James Comey, who was investigating Russia's role in interfering with the November election.

The president of news for Fox, Jay Wallace, told NPR he'd seen no "concrete evidence" of misquoting.

