

## White House Pushed Fox News to Publish Seth Rich Story, Lawsuit Claims

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With **Donald Trump** reportedly under investigation for potential obstruction of justice, new reports are raising questions about how the West Wing has obfuscated facts about Russian interference in the 2016 election. On Monday night, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that the president personally dictated the initial misleading statement the White House gave about **Donald Trump Jr.'s** meeting with a Russian lawyer at Trump Tower last summer. Now, a new lawsuit asserts that the president also personally approved a since-debunked Fox News story about the unsolved murder of Seth Rich, a former Democratic National Committee staffer whose July 2016 death is at the center of various right-wing conspiracy theories about the Russia investigation.

The discredited story, which Fox News [retracted](#) in May, suggested that Rich, not Russian hackers, was the source for the leaked D.N.C. e-mails that were published by WikiLeaks last year, and implied that his shooting death may have been part of a cover-up effort. “On May 16, a story was posted on the Fox News website on the investigation into the 2016 murder of DNC Staffer Seth Rich,” Fox News said in a [statement](#) at the time. “The article was not initially subjected to the high degree of editorial scrutiny we require for all our reporting. Upon appropriate review, the article was found not to meet those standards and has since been removed.”

On Tuesday, **Rod Wheeler**, a longtime Fox News contributor and former police investigator, sued the network over the retracted report. In the lawsuit—which was first [reported](#) by NPR—Wheeler alleges that Fox News, the Trump White House, and **Ed Butowsky**, a wealthy Trump supporter and unpaid Fox News commentator, worked together to use Rich’s murder to cast doubt on the conclusion by U.S. intelligence agencies that the D.N.C. was hacked by Russia. “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 D.N.C. e-mails,” **Douglas Wigdor**, Wheeler’s lawyer, told NPR. (While Wheeler’s claims have yet to be proven in court and have not been independently verified, the lawsuit claims that “Every quotation in this complaint is from an email, text message, published news article and/or recorded or videotaped conversation.”)

The original Fox News story relied heavily on quotes from an unnamed F.B.I. official and Wheeler, the latter of whom claims that Fox News producer **Malia Zimmerman** fabricated two statements and wrongly attributed them to him. Per the filing, they are:

“My investigation up to this point shows there was some degree of email exchange between Seth Rich and WikiLeaks.”

“My investigation shows someone within the D.C. government, Democratic National Committee or Clinton team is blocking the murder investigation from going forward. That is unfortunate. Seth Rich’s murder is unsolved as a result of that.”

The lawsuit claims that Wheeler was “subsequently forced to correct the false record and, as a result, lost all credibility in the eyes of the public,” and that he has “suffered irreparable damage to his reputation and his career will likely never recover.” The statements, according to the lawsuit, were “falsely attributed to Mr. Wheeler because that is the way the president wanted the article” and that they were concocted by Zimmerman, Butowsky, and Fox in order to “advance President Trump’s agenda.”

Wheeler—who Butowsky hired on behalf of the Rich family to investigate the murder of the former D.N.C. staffer—alleges that Butowsky pressured him through a series of text messages and phone calls, and that Butowsky had told him story had come to the attention of the White House. “Not to add any more pressure but the president just read the article. He wants the article out immediately. It’s now all up to you,” Butowsky wrote in a text message, according to the lawsuit. Butowsky also allegedly left Wheeler a voicemail in which he said, “A couple of minutes ago I got a note that we have the full, uh, attention of the White House on this. And, tomorrow, let’s close this deal, whatever we’ve got to do. But you can feel free to say that the White House is onto this now.”

During the daily White House briefing on Tuesday, Press Secretary **Sarah Huckabee Sanders** said Trump was unaware of the Fox News story before its publication. “The president had no knowledge of the story and it is completely untrue that there was White House involvement,” she [said](#).

The lawsuit also alleges that Butowsky urged Wheeler to push the narrative that it was Rich, not the Russians that hacked the D.N.C. “[T]he narrative in the interviews you might use is that you and [Fox News reporter Malia Zimmerman’s] work prove that the Russians didn’t hack into the DNC and steal the emails and impact our elections,” Butowsky allegedly wrote in one text exchange. “If you can, try to highlight this puts the Russian hacking story to rest.”

Butowsky [told CNN](#) that his message about the president reading the article was a joke. “This was Rod and I,” he said. “We teased all the time. We were basically telling him you are doing a great job and that the president or the White House or somebody would be interested in meeting you.” But Wheeler and Butowsky were, in fact, in contact with the White House, according to then-Press Secretary **Sean Spicer**. “Ed’s been a longtime supporter of the president and asked to meet to catch up,” Spicer told NPR on Monday night, confirming that the three had met about a month before Fox News published the story in April. “It had nothing to do with advancing the president’s domestic agenda—and there was no agenda. . . . They were just informing me of the [Fox] story.” Spicer added that he has no knowledge of any contact between Trump and Butowsky. Butowsky also denies that he shared drafts of the Fox News story with Trump or the president’s aides, claiming that he sought to help Wheeler land a job in the administration. (Wigdor, Wheeler’s lawyer, says there is no evidence to support this claim.)

Wheeler, an African-American, is also suing Fox News for discrimination, alleging that he didn’t advance in the network’s ranks as rapidly as some of his white co-workers due to his race.

**Jay Wallace** the president of news at Fox News, dismissed Wheeler’s claims in a statement. “The accusation that FoxNews.com published Malia Zimmerman’s story to help detract from coverage of the Russia collusion issue is completely erroneous,” Wallace wrote. “The retraction of this story is being investigated internally and we have no evidence that Wheeler was misquoted by Zimmerman. Additionally, Fox News vehemently denies the race claims in the lawsuit—the dispute between Zimmerman and Rod Wheeler has nothing to do with race.”