

Journalism largely failed in R. Kelly case, but Sun-Times reporters persisted

Jim DeRogatis, a Chicago pop music critic with a hard news background, almost threw away a fax he received the day before Thanksgiving in 2000. It was that fax—and not an anonymous videotape—that started DeRogatis on the trail of singer-songwriter R. Kelly, who was [charged](#) and arrested on Friday for sex crimes. The inaccurate videotape story is still circulating among journalists, which is somehow fitting. When it comes to the stories about Kelly, one of the best-selling music artists of all time, journalism largely failed.

[DeRogatis](#) and fellow Chicago Sun-Times legal affairs reporter Abdon Pallasch began looking into allegations about Kelly a full 14 months before any video dropped into their lap. And for years, it was DeRogatis and Pallasch, along with Sun-Times columnist Mary Mitchell, who were the only ones who continued to investigate, pound the pavement and report on numerous lawsuit settlements and allegations from underage girls.



Abdon Pallasch and Jim DeRogatis wait for the start of the press conference announcing charges against singer R. Kelly. (Photo by Bob Chiarito)

Kelly, a Grammy Award winner whose hits include “I Believe I Can Fly,” was indicted on child pornography charges in 2002 and was acquitted in a 2008 trial. Last Friday, the 52-year-old was indicted again, this time facing 10 counts of aggravated criminal sexual abuse against four different victims, the youngest who was 14 when the alleged crimes took place.

After the 2008 acquittal, allegations against Kelly seemed to go away until DeRogatis published a [lengthy expose](#) in July

2017 in BuzzFeed with new accusations. One was that Kelly had several women living with him who were brainwashed and not allowed to have any contact with their families.

Then, last month, [a six-part documentary](#) called “Surviving R. Kelly” aired on Lifetime and put gasoline on the embers that DeRogatis’ story lit, prompting Cook County State’s Attorney Kim Foxx to take an unusual step and [urge any Kelly victims](#) to come forward. On Feb. 22, six weeks later, Foxx held a press conference to announce a new indictment against Kelly. DeRogatis and Pallasch, the pair who wrote the first story about Kelly 19 years ago, [were in the room](#).

Pallasch, who left reporting in 2012 and now works as director of communications for Illinois Comptroller Susana Mendoza, said he felt a sense of vindication from the indictment.

“There’s vindication because when we first started doing the stories, it was very hard to get our fellow journalists to take it seriously,” Pallasch said.

Their dogged reporting was the genesis of a story headed for a trash pile of old press releases and nasty letters. The nation and the authorities had finally paid attention.

The first tip

On the day before Thanksgiving in 2000, DeRogatis received an anonymous fax alleging that there was more to the story of Aaliyah Dana Haughton, a pop star who reportedly married Kelly when she was 15. Haughton died in a 2001 plane crash at the age of 22. It also alleged that Kelly was being investigated for sex crimes and had been sued. The fax named “a sergeant with a real Chicago name to call,” DeRogatis recalled. “You know what I did with that fax on the day before Thanksgiving in 2000? I threw it in the slush pile of press releases, letters from angry readers saying things like ‘Hip Hop is not music; it’s noise’ and ‘How dare you call Eric Clapton a geezer.’ It was headed for the trash.”

But early career skills honed as a beat and investigative reporter in New Jersey kicked in, DeRogatis said.

“The reporter’s instinct bugged the hell out of me all that Thanksgiving weekend,” he said. “You’re not going to make up a cop name like that.”

The Monday after Thanksgiving, DeRogatis went into the office to look at the fax again. He called the police switchboard and asked for the investigator. There was no investigator by that name. “I almost hung up, but I asked if they had anyone with a similar name working sex crimes,” DeRogatis said. He was transferred right away.

“This is Jim DeRogatis from the Sun-Times,” he told the investigator. “Are you investigating R. Kelly for underage sexual relationships?” The investigator confirmed. “Oh, I was wondering how long it would take before somebody called about that. I can’t talk to you.” The investigator hung up.

But the fax also had mentioned a lawsuit. Sun-Times City Editor Don Hayner asked another reporter, Pallasch, to chase that lead. “Abdon amazingly found a 235-page file deep in the bowels of Dorothy Brown’s Circuit Court,” DeRogatis said. “So, that started it. Abdon and I sat at his desk...and we highlighted notes and put post-it notes on things and said ‘we could check this; we could check that.’ We pulled hundreds of pages of Nexis people search records. I called all the human beings, and he called all the lawyers,” he said laughing. “It started from there.”

The first story ran December 21, 2000. “Nobody paid a damn bit of attention to it,” DeRogatis said. “No follow-ups in the Chicago Tribune, no follow-ups anywhere.”

The tapes

But the story did generate more tips. Two weeks after the story ran, DeRogatis got a videotape in the mail. “It was

sent via FedEx from me, to me,” he said. “Obviously, I didn’t send it. It was only two and a half minutes long. All that FedEx could tell us is that it originated in Los Angeles. To this day, no one knows who the girl is on that tape. We gave that to the police because we were unsure if she was under age; we suspected she was. But, without a name we couldn’t prove that. We took a discreet headshot that the photo staff pulled, and we showed it to all of our sources and nobody could identify who the girl was. To this day, somewhere in the bowels of CPD special investigations, that tape exists.”

DeRogatis got a second tape—the basis for the 2008 trial—in 2002. The Sun-Times turned it over to Chicago Police. “It took a week to do the reporting,” DeRogatis said. “We had never reported on the first video because we had no details about it. We had one sentence in the story about the second video that said ‘The Sun-Times had received an earlier video.’”

Fast forward to present day and DeRogatis, a Columbia College Chicago professor is still reporting on Kelly, most recently for [The New Yorker](#). He also has [a book](#) set to be released in June on the failure of journalism, the courts, and the police in the Kelly saga.

“I’m just profoundly sad that Chicago failed in every aspect,” DeRogatis said. “ In journalism, in the music industry, in the courts, in the cops. It’s horrifying to me.”

Reached Sunday by phone, Mitchell said she is curious what changed in the years since she first started writing about the Kelly. “In 2002 when he was initially indicted and through that whole period where he was waiting to go to trial, the [black] community still supported him,” she said. “During that time he received an NAACP Image Award, if you could imagine. People were attacking Abdon, Jim and I for even writing about this. Accusing us of trying to publicly lynch a black man.”

Mitchell’s comment alludes to one of the beliefs she, along

with Pallasch and DeRogatis have for why all other reporters left the story with them for so long.

“There’s no way around it – South and West Side victims,” DeRogatis said. “The girls are all black” except for one. DeRogatis told the story in [Buzzfeed](#) last year of a Puerto Rican woman who alleged that Kelly had sex with her when she was underage and then continued to abuse her for several more years.

Pallasch said the reporters laid out the roadmap for other journalists in Chicago. “Why don’t the rest of you follow?” he said. “Everyone sort of shrugged it off. If some of these girls had been white girl victims, would it have been different? Is part of it that he was only sexually abusing black teenage girls, is that part of the reason why they let him get away with it for so long and didn’t take it seriously and didn’t invest the resources to investigating it? I don’t think you can dismiss that.”

Mitchell said she started writing columns about the Kelly allegations because the black community needed to come to terms with the allegations and also because the stories needed editorial context from a black point of view.

“I thought from an editorial standpoint that it was not a good idea for two white male reporters to go after Kelly because it would look unbalanced. You could make the argument that some white reporter with a bug up his ass was trying to get Kelly,” Mitchell said hypothetically. “I joined the team because one, I’m a columnist and I was able to give context and take a side. I could give an opinion. My opinion was not so much to give cover to Abdon and Jim, but to call out the community about how it was dealing with these accusations.”

For that, Mitchell especially was often on the receiving end of angry letters.

“She caught holy hell,” DeRogatis said.

In response to her [Sunday column](#) in which she characterized the current Kelly indictment as the black community's "MeToo" moment, Mitchell said she received several emails with the same tone as when she wrote about Kelly more than a decade ago.

Writing about allegations of criminal behavior is risky, and was likely another reason no one else wanted to follow up on the Sun-Times stories.

Mitchell said the Sun-Times staff took a big risk looking at the videotapes.

"Reporters, editors, all of them could have been charged with looking at child pornography," she said. "So I think that was an element in the decision by other editors not to tell the story. The other thing was R. Kelly was in his heyday making a lot of money and suing a lot of people and threatening suits to a lot of people. Why take that risk? I could see editors sit back and let the Sun-Times do all the work, which is what we did. It definitely became our story."

Pallasch agreed. "Part of the issue was there was all sorts of touchy, legal risks to reporting on that story," Pallasch said. "R. Kelly had the best lawyers money could buy and they would threaten anybody. They threatened us but we didn't care anyway. But other publications that were threatened were not going to put in the kind of man-hours that Jim and I had put in doing the research and going out knocking on doors."

Another reason it may have been ignored by reporters is because of how some categorized it, DeRogatis said.

"It's falling between beats. It's not on the crime beat. This is a music story," DeRogatis said sarcastically. "Let's say we had a predator teacher, God forbid, with 48 victims. It would be all hands on deck. But this is a music story."

Tips for the next generation

Additionally the practices of newspapers were different in 2008 and one thing that remained the same – a rivalry between the Tribune and Sun-Times – may have also added to the reason no one grabbed the baton from DeRogatis, Pallasch and Mitchell.

“That was before news organizations started aggregating,” Mitchell said. “So, if you broke a story it was your story and it was sort of hands off for everyone else.”

The trio not the reporting that went into chasing the story,. Mitchell described it as “old-fashioned journalism where you sniff something out.”

“You have a feeling in your gut that something is wrong here, and you follow it and report on it, and no matter what anyone else is saying, you stick with it,” she added.

Pallasch pointed out the obvious lesson. “Pay attention, give a damn.”

DeRogatis recalled some advice he got from two news editors when he first started out as a reporter in Jersey City. “They both swear they didn’t tell me this, but I know it was one of them so I credit them both,” he said. “Sometimes you choose your story, and sometimes your story chooses you.” DeRogatis has added the rest. “And you’re not a journalist if you don’t stay ‘til the end of the story.”

Bob Chiarito is a freelance journalist based in Chicago who has reported on the R. Kelly story for the New York Times.