

It sickens me to think that those intent on abusing state power for corrupt purposes used articles published by the *Sunday Times* on irregular police killings and the rendition of suspects to Zimbabwe for their nefarious ends.

This was also the case with the lamentable reporting on the SARS rogue unit. But I was not editor at the time the SARS “rogue unit” stories were published, and it does not follow that because errors were made there, they must have occurred in all preceding stories.

The public discussion of the reporting on the Cato Manor killings has roused anger, and I have felt it intensely over the past week.

This anger is good. It comes from a good place. Readers love this newspaper and expect it to maintain the highest standards, and when they are told that it has fallen short, they are disappointed.

And readers are angry at state capture. They are right to be.

As the editor who was on duty when the decision was taken to publish these stories, I have been the focus of this.

I share the anger at state capture, and my record of exposing it in countless stories before this became fashionable stands for itself.

But I have to account for the stories which were published under my watch.

*Sunday Times* editor Bongani Siqoko did as much in his article published last Sunday.

He wrote: “As reporters and editors we have an ethical and journalistic duty to interrogate suspicions of abuse of power, accusations of wrongdoing, and any other incidents that are in the public interest. We did just that in these stories, basing our decision on news value, professional judgment and the public’s right to know.”

He went further to state: “We were in pursuit of nothing but the truth and we were not motivated by political, commercial or personal interests. We stood to gain nothing from reporting on these issues but merely fulfilled our constitutional obligation to inform you.”

For a moment it seemed he had taken the courageous step to stand up to the mounting noise over the stories to oppose the tide of criticism.

Then Siqoko’s article took an inexplicable turn for the worse.

He took issue with the headline - it was actually the secondary headline - which used the words ‘death squad’, saying that was going too far. This I am prepared to accept. Perhaps the old journalistic fig leaf ‘alleged’ ought to have been used.

He points out that only 12 of the killings, not 18, were suspicious. To his mind, this makes a difference. To mine it does not. One killing would have been too many.

Imagine that a unit of the police in Birmingham, Alabama, was linked to the irregular death of 12 black suspects? All lives matter, even those of suspected criminals.

Siqoko says the articles suggested that General Johan Booysen was somehow directly responsible for the killings.

The articles did no such thing. They said the police accused of the killings fell under “the ultimate command” of Booysen.

General Booysen phoned me, saying he wished to share his views on the Cato Manor article. A reporter was dispatched to interview him in person.

He was quoted prominently in the article.

This is what he said when asked if the Cato Manor unit had committed crimes: “I would strongly disagree with you. Their lives were at stake, they defended themselves in a shoot-out.”

“Cato Manor only investigates murder, armed robbery, ATM bombing, serial killing and serious rape cases. They made 437 arrests in the last two years. The facts are, they do arrest very violent people.”

He is later quoted as saying he had no objection to an official investigation because “it may prove once and for all that the picture created about Cato Manor is totally wrong.”

It is a great pity that the authorities did not share his view and institute such an inquiry.

I happen to believe that Booysen did not order killings, commit killings or witness them. No such allegation was made in the articles, and it is shameful that the National Prosecuting Authority - clearly pursuing an agenda - subsequently chose to attack him over this.

The suggestion by Siqoko that the newspaper ought to have anticipated that the NPA would act in this manner and publish the outline of a vast criminal conspiracy to capture the state is naive.

This was a story about the excessive use of force by a police unit which resulted in lives being taken, not a speculative blog post about a conspiracy.

If this approach were taken, there would be no investigative journalism, just a large cloud of tobacco smoke in which conspiracies swirled about.

The essence of Siqoko’s article is that the *Sunday Times* under my stewardship fell victim to “peddlers of fake news”.

One such peddler was apparently one Toshan Panday, who was under investigation by Booysen.

You may recognise the name. Panday was the subject of a damning and detailed front page expose in the *Sunday Times*. Who wrote this article? The same journalists who are now described as doing his bidding in the interests of state capture.

I was shocked to read Siqoko's conclusion that the *Sunday Times* would return the money paid for the awards that this story won. The effect of this was that he believed the stories were illegitimate and wholly false.

No such demand has been made by those who gave the awards. Perhaps they should politely decline Siqoko's offer until this matter has been conclusively investigated.

How did he make that leap from his earlier statement, which, let me remind you, read: "As reporters and editors we have an ethical and journalistic duty to interrogate suspicions of abuse of power, accusations of wrongdoing, and any other incidents that are in the public interest. We did just that in these stories, basing our decision on news value, professional judgment and the public's right to know."

I and the reporters involved in these stories spent many hours with Siqoko openly and fully divulging the sources and the process which this year-long investigation took. None of this was reflected in his article. Perhaps it would have chimed badly with his astonishing conclusion.

Make no mistake, these journalists put their lives at risk tackling this story. They waded knee-deep through the blood of KwaZulu-Natal's killing fields, and that deserves to be honoured not dismissed. Did they make errors? Yes, they did. Were any of these errors fatal to the conclusion that irregular killings occurred? No they were not.

Many allegations by hucksters, charlatans disgraced journalists and, tragically, some doyens of the media profession have been made against the reporters on the Cato Manor story. Not one shred of credible evidence has been produced to back this up. If such evidence were ever produced, I would be the first to insist that the very harshest punishment be forthcoming.

Since the publication of Siqoko's article, my 30-year reputation as an ethical, fair and accurate journalist and editor has been severely damaged. I am greeted in the street with looks of pity and, sometimes, anger.

Those who know me have stood by me, and I am grateful for that.

My record speaks for itself. I joined the dots while Thabo Mbeki was still president, predicting that Jacob Zuma would seek to destroy the prosecution service, cow the criminal justice system and cause the economy to tank by damaging the country's financial rating.

The *Sunday Times* felt Zuma's attempt to capture the media more keenly than most. One of our reporters was bundled into a police van and transported to Mpumalanga in secret. When I confronted Zuma with this in the one and only interview he ever granted the newspaper under

my stewardship, he laughed while staring at me with cold eyes. It was spine-chilling. I knew we were at war with a very powerful enemy.

Sunday after Sunday we exposed Zuma's gradual grasping of the state by the throat. "State capture" was not how we described it back then. But it was not hard to see that this grim empire of corruption was growing into a monster. It was going to end badly.

The idea that has been floated by some – admittedly, mostly out on the fringes – that I deliberately sought to assist with the capture of the state is not borne out by my many articles, editorials and commentary which have been consistently heavily critical of the creeping cronyism of the Zuma presidency. I recall praising Zuma's administration for finally rolling out comprehensive Aids treatment. Other than that, not a single word was written which in any way supported Zuma's assault on the integrity of the state.

I am pleased that Sanef has chosen to fully investigate this matter. It needs to be a thorough, independent and unsparing effort to get to the bottom of what happened.

I am confident that the conspiracy theory that the *Sunday Times* deliberately sought to assist with state capture will be disproved.

There is a great danger that this episode will have a chilling effect on investigative reporting as journalists fear they may become the victims of public campaigns against their stories. If that happens, the road will be paved for a new round of state capture, this time free of the irritation of probing, independent criticism.