

Jan Guillou and the Business of Panic

[Speaker 2]

Usually, when we think about a fire alarm going off in a crowded building, the natural, you know, completely human response is just a panic.

[Speaker 1]

Right. Everyone just runs straight for the exits.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. The sirens are blaring, the strobe lights are flashing, and the collective mindset just narrows down to one single thought, which is, get out of the building.

[Speaker 1]

It's a totally primal instinct. I mean, the group moves as one because the perceived threat demands this immediate, unquestioning action. You don't stand around debating the wiring of the alarm system when you think the roof is on fire.

[Speaker 2]

No, of course not. But imagine one person in that building who refuses to run. Instead, they walk straight over to the alarm panel on the wall, cross their arms, and ask a very different set of questions.

[Speaker 1]

Which is pretty much the exact opposite of what you're supposed to do.

[Speaker 2]

Right. They want to know, like, who actually pulled this lever, and what are they quietly moving out the back door while we're all stampeding through the front?

[Speaker 1]

That's a great analogy.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. So today, we're taking you inside the mind of the person standing at that alarm panel. We're jumping into a really massive deep dive today.

[Speaker 1]

We really are.

[Speaker 2]

Our mission is to connect every single headline from this huge stack of sources we've got. It's a collection of columns written between 2005 and 2006, along with a 2021 foreword by Yan Guiyu. He's one of Scandinavia's most prominent and, well, aggressively provocative journalists.

[Speaker 1]

Very provocative, yeah.

[Speaker 2]

So we're unpacking all of this to understand the anatomy of contrarian journalism during a wildly turbulent era. We want to see how a society's true nature is often revealed. Not by what everyone agrees on, but by what the lone contrarian just refuses to let go of.

[Speaker 1]

But before we really get into the thick of this, we have to establish some ground rules for today's deep dive.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, definitely.

[Speaker 1]

Because the texts we're unpacking cover incredibly intense, polarizing political debates. I mean, we're talking about the war on terror, feminism, media ethics, corporate capitalism.

[Speaker 2]

Heavy stuff.

[Speaker 1]

It's extremely heavy. So our role here is purely as guides to the source material. We are going to impartially map out how the author constructs his argument.

[Speaker 2]

Right. We're not taking sides here.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. We are absolutely not endorsing the political viewpoints presented. Our goal is just to analyze the mechanics of his contrarian approach.

Just wanted to make that super clear for everyone listening.

[Speaker 2]

Perfect. And understanding those mechanics really starts with his underlying philosophy, right? In his later retrospective, he lays out what you might call like a contrarian's manifesto.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. He argues that a columnist's primary duty is to contradict the overwhelming majority of their colleagues.

[Speaker 2]

Which sounds exhausting.

[Speaker 1]

It does. But he believes that if the entire media establishment, whether left, right or center, is focused on one narrative, it's his professional obligation to look in the opposite direction.

[Speaker 2]

And he applies a very specific tactical filter to this, doesn't he? Like the Trump example.

[Speaker 1]

Right. He actually explains why he actively avoided writing about Donald Trump during his presidency.

[Speaker 2]

Which is wild. Because for a political commentator, Trump was just the ultimate low-hanging fruit.

[Speaker 1]

He was everywhere. Every single day presented a new outrage. But the author argues that adding your voice to a chorus of thousands of other journalists giving reprimands achieves absolutely nothing.

[Speaker 2]

He compares it to a tiny local paper during World War I, right?

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, like a tiny Swedish newspaper printing a stern warning to the German chancellor. It creates an illusion of influence, but it's ultimately just noise.

[Speaker 2]

So he wants to tackle the crucial issues that everyone else is too afraid or too distracted to touch, even if it makes him sound like a complete crank.

[Speaker 1]

But he also recognizes the danger of going too far in that direction. He brings up this 1970s columnist, Osa Moberg.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, right. The one who only wrote about nuclear power.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. She decided the fight against nuclear power was the single most important issue in the world. So she simply stopped writing about anything else.

[Speaker 2]

But what happened?

[Speaker 1]

Well, eventually readers just tuned her out and she lost her platform. He admires her ideological purity, but he acknowledges it was a total tactical disaster.

[Speaker 2]

So imagine that, being handed a megaphone to the whole country and deciding your only job is to yell, you're all looking the wrong way. But if you yell it the exact same way every day...

[Speaker 1]

People just put in earplugs. Influence requires an audience. If you treat your platform like a sledgehammer hitting the exact same spot every single day, people become numb to the impact.

[Speaker 2]

You have to find a variety of lenses to push back against the consensus.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. And when you look at his archives from the mid-2000s, you see this method in practice. He uses his columns to show how small, seemingly isolated ripples of hysteria actually disguise massive structural shifts in society.

[Speaker 2]

Let's test that framework against an actual crisis then. Because it's one thing to be a contrarian about abstract political theory, but it's another to apply it to a massive human tragedy. Right.

In early 2005, the world was reeling from the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami. He had just returned from Indonesia, which had over 100,000 casualties.

[Speaker 1]

Just an unfathomable loss of life.

[Speaker 2]

And he observed that the Indonesian media and public largely processed the event as an act of nature, a collective tragedy to be mourned.

[Speaker 1]

But when he returned to Sweden, the narrative was completely different.

[Speaker 2]

Night and day. The Swedish media was consumed by this aggressive hunt for political scapegoats. They were demanding the resignations of top government ministers like Leila Frivols and Göran Persson over the emergency response.

[Speaker 1]

And this is where he diagnoses a profound dysfunction in how modern societies process grief. He argues that the Swedish media establishment simply could not accept an event where no human was to blame.

[Speaker 2]

They had to transform a natural disaster into a political scandal.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. They obsessed over whether the foreign minister went to the theater instead of coordinating crisis centers, framing these bureaucratic missteps as the actual cause of the national trauma.

[Speaker 2]

OK, I have to push back a little here.

[Speaker 1]

Go for it.

[Speaker 2]

The tsunami itself was obviously an act of nature, sure, but the government's ability to evacuate citizens, provide consular support or set up hotlines, that is entirely within human control. So isn't holding power accountable for bureaucratic failure exactly what the press is supposed to do? It feels like he views the media as a hammer, and every tragedy is just a nail labeled find a scapegoat.

[Speaker 1]

That's a totally valid pushback. But he isn't arguing that governments shouldn't have competent emergency protocols. His critique is aimed at the proportion and the underlying psychology of the coverage.

[Speaker 2]

OK, so it's about the scale of the reaction.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. He identifies an illusion of control. The media's intense focus on government bureaucracy was a way to pretend that this chaotic, terrifying force of nature could have been managed if only the right politicians had been at their desks.

[Speaker 2]

Ah, I see. By manufacturing a tangible human villain, they offer the public a target for their anger.

[Speaker 1]

Which is much easier to process than raw existential grief. He views this hunt for scapegoats as fundamentally meaningless and a distraction from actual mourning.

[Speaker 2]

And if the media needs a villain that badly when dealing with a natural disaster, you can only imagine what happens when they are handed an actual crime.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, it completely derails institutions.

[Speaker 2]

He points to this highly publicized Swedish criminal case from that era, the dismemberment murder involving two doctors. He likens the entire media and legal circus to a modern day Salem witch trial.

[Speaker 1]

And the comparison to a witch trial isn't just hyperbole. It's about the mechanics of the panic. The accusation started as a custody dispute and just snowballed into wild, verifiable impossibilities.

[Speaker 2]

Like allegations of satanic rituals and cannibalism.

[Speaker 1]

Right. And the terrifying part wasn't just that someone made these claims. It was that established institutions validated them.

The primary evidence driving this panic was a mother's highly interpretive translation of her two-year-old toddler's babble.

[Speaker 2]

Wait, really? The legal and media establishments seriously entertained the idea of satanic cannibal cults operating in Sweden based on a toddler's babble?

[Speaker 1]

Yes. That's exactly what happened.

[Speaker 2]

How does a functioning society lose its grip on reality that quickly? And more importantly, the text mentions that the public broadcaster, SVT, actually suppressed a feature-length documentary that cleared the doctors.

[Speaker 1]

They buried it, entirely out of fear of backlash from cultural journalists who had already decided the doctors were guilty.

[Speaker 2]

That's wild.

[Speaker 1]

But that is the exact mechanism of the panic he's trying to expose. When a narrative becomes morally absolute, when the accused are painted as literally demonic, any attempt to introduce due process or objective evidence is treated as defending evil.

[Speaker 2]

So, the institutions prioritize self-preservation over truth.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. The courts, the psychological experts, the broadcasters, they all collapse under the pressure of moral hysteria.

[Speaker 2]

And this ideological capture doesn't just happen to the media. He highlights a massive scandal within ROKS, the National Organization for Women's Shelters in Sweden.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, a leading figure there, a sociology professor named Eva Lundgren, was actively pushing the theory that there were widespread secret networks of men in Sweden participating in satanic child sacrifice.

[Speaker 2]

It just sounds so absurd now. But he draws a very careful line here, doesn't he?

[Speaker 1]

He does. He strongly advocates for the actual on-the-ground work of women's shelters. Protecting victims of domestic violence is a chronic, underfunded necessity.

But he argues that you cannot allow the leadership of such a vital organization to be hijacked by an ideology disconnected from reality. When the leadership starts hunting for phantom satanic cults, it delegitimizes the very real everyday violence they're supposed to be fighting.

[Speaker 2]

So let's connect these pieces for you listening. We have a society that is desperately searching for scapegoats to explain natural disasters. We have legal institutions willing to throw out due process.

We have social organizations captured by fringe conspiracy theories.

[Speaker 1]

The immune system against panic is totally compromised.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. So what happens when politicians present them with an actual geopolitical boogeyman? This brings us to the domestic impact of the War on Terror.

[Speaker 1]

The mid-2000s were really defined by the rhetoric of the War on Terror. And this is where his analysis shifts from cultural critique to structural alarm.

[Speaker 2]

He focuses intensely on Justice Minister Thomas Bostrom's push for sweeping new surveillance laws.

[Speaker 1]

Right. These laws aim to allow preemptive wiretapping, reading physical mail, and secret searches of citizens who hadn't formerly been suspected of any crime, all under the banner of preventative measures.

[Speaker 2]

The classic justification, right? If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.

[Speaker 1]

But he forcefully rejects that premise. He essentially calls these race laws in practice.

[Speaker 2]

Because the extraordinary powers weren't going to be used on the general public.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. They were going to be targeted at an ethnically-specific group, specifically citizens named Mohammed.

[Speaker 2]

And he dissects this incredibly dangerous legal paradox being used to justify the laws.

[Speaker 1]

The government's argument was that terrorism is a different kind of crime, one so uniquely dangerous that it requires suspending standard democratic rights.

[Speaker 2]

Which he completely dismantles.

[Speaker 1]

Totally. He points out that the actions associated with the terrorism, murder, sabotage, explosions, they are already illegal. We already have established democratic investigative methods for handling them.

[Speaker 2]

Like if a chemical plant explodes due to an industrial accident, it's a tragedy. But we don't suspend the constitution to investigate it.

[Speaker 1]

Right. Why does an explosion caused by political sabotage suddenly require the dismantling of civil liberties?

[Speaker 2]

It's like installing a secret backdoor into the security system of your own house. Because you're terrified of a specific burglar.

[Speaker 1]

That's a great way to put it.

[Speaker 2]

You give the master key to a private security firm and say, do whatever it takes to keep me safe. But once that backdoor exists, you no longer control who uses it or why. You've permanently compromised your own architecture.

[Speaker 1]

And he warns that dismantling democracy in order to protect it is the ultimate victory for any terrorist.

[Speaker 2]

But the public accepts this erosion of rights because their mental defenses have been worn down. He points to this stunning example from a major Swedish newspaper, Dagens Nyheter.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah, the DN op-ed. They published a piece about the supposed threat of Islam. And he analyzed the text and demonstrated that it used literal, recognizable 1930s anti-Semitic conspiracy rhetoric.

[Speaker 2]

Claims of secret infiltration, hidden agendas for world domination.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. Pretending to want dialogue while plotting destruction, the author simply swapped the word Jew for Muslim.

[Speaker 2]

That is chilling. And his point isn't just that someone out there holds extreme views. His point is that the debate editors at a highly respected newspaper read literal 1930s hate speech and thought, yes, this is a reasonable contribution to the public discourse.

[Speaker 1]

The daily drumbeat of fear had so thoroughly softened the intellectual ground that authoritarian rhetoric just felt normal.

[Speaker 2]

And politicians eagerly capitalized on this. He critiqued the Swedish Liberal Party, Folkpartiet, for adopting a holy war framing.

[Speaker 1]

They began viewing the world in purely apocalyptic terms. Noble Western democracy facing down evil totalitarians.

[Speaker 2]

By reducing complex global conflicts to a comic book battle of good versus evil, they absolved themselves of having to examine actual geopolitical causes.

[Speaker 1]

Like the history of Western military interventions, it becomes much easier to push for military expansion and domestic surveillance when you convince the public they are fighting the devil.

[Speaker 2]

And the tabloid media, sensing a goldmine, just acts as an accelerant. There was an incident where a minor celebrity pastor, Werner Sogard, insulted the Prophet Muhammad during a sermon.

[Speaker 1]

And instead of treating it as the crude remark of a public figure, a major tabloid entirely fabricated a story.

[Speaker 2]

They claimed international terror cells were holding secret meetings in Sweden to plan his assassination. They literally manufactured a national terror threat purely to sell newspapers.

[Speaker 1]

He warns that there is a massive hidden cost to this kind of sensationalism. When you publish fabricated terror threats, you don't just sell papers. You incite actual extremists who might see the article as a call to action.

[Speaker 2]

And you continuously reinforce the demonization of the entire Muslim population. So if the tabloids are willing to fabricate a localized threat to make a profit, what happens when they collide with a real international pressure cooker?

[Speaker 1]

This leads us straight into the Danish cartoon crisis.

[Speaker 2]

Early 2006, the Jyllands-Posten newspaper published caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad, setting off massive global protests, embassy burnings, economic boycotts.

[Speaker 1]

And Guy's take on this is a masterclass in separating legal rights from moral responsibility. He makes a very sharp, deliberate distinction.

[Speaker 2]

He fully defends the legal right of the Danish newspaper to publish those cartoons.

[Speaker 1]

He does. He notes that under Danish law, Muslims were not classified as an ethnic group in a way that would trigger hate speech protections. So, publishing the cartoons was legal.

[Speaker 2]

But morally and politically, he completely eviscerates the decision.

[Speaker 1]

Yes. He strips away their heroic framing. The newspaper claimed they were bravely testing the boundaries of free speech against totalitarian censorship.

[Speaker 2]

Which sounds noble, but...

[Speaker 1]

But he points out that mocking a marginalized, highly demonized minority group within your own country is not a brave test of free speech. It's just bullying.

[Speaker 2]

True courage is testing boundaries against those who actually hold institutional power over you. Punching down is legally permissible, but it isn't brave.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. And the situation escalated from a poor editorial decision into a global crisis purely because of political arrogance.

[Speaker 2]

From the Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

[Speaker 1]

Right. When ambassadors from 11 Muslim countries requested a diplomatic meeting to discuss the growing anger and try to de-escalate, the Prime Minister flatly refused to even let them in the door.

[Speaker 2]

Claiming he couldn't interfere with the free press.

[Speaker 1]

Which is incredibly disingenuous. As Guy points out, he didn't need to censor the paper. He just needed to do his job as a statesman.

[Speaker 2]

He could have just met with the ambassadors, explained that the government doesn't dictate editorial policy, but acknowledged the cartoons were deeply insensitive.

[Speaker 1]

Diplomacy is literally the art of diffusing tension. Instead, he saw an opportunity to score points with anti-immigrant voters at home by acting tough. He prioritized domestic political posturing over international stability.

[Speaker 2]

And the result was a catastrophic escalation. What Guy finds equally infuriating is the reaction right across the border. Swedish liberal commentators suddenly wrapped themselves in the flag of free speech, declaring, we are all Danes.

[Speaker 1]

He exposes this solidarity as entirely hollow by pointing to the actual legal reality in Denmark. At the time, Denmark still had strict blasphemy laws on the books.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, right. The Jesus hypothetical.

[Speaker 1]

Yeah. He poses this brilliant hypothetical. If this newspaper genuinely wanted to test the limits of free expression, they should have published graphic mocking cartoons of Jesus Christ.

[Speaker 2]

But they wouldn't dare do that.

[Speaker 1]

Because under Danish law, mocking Jesus could result in actual criminal prosecution. Plus, the public backlash from the Christian majority would be immense.

[Speaker 2]

So the whole free speech defense was just a convenient shield, a way to justify kicking a specific minority group that lacked the political power to fight back legally.

[Speaker 1]

Exactly. So let's step back and look at the landscape we've mapped out here. We have a public exhausted by fabricated terror threats, scandalized by international cartoon crises, and constantly hunting for scapegoats.

[Speaker 2]

The entire society is looking frantically at the fire alarm. What is happening in the background while everyone is glued to this noise? Where is the real fire?

[Speaker 1]

This brings us to the core of his worldview, the quiet plunder. While the front pages are consumed by panic, the business pages are quietly documenting a massive structural theft.

[Speaker 2]

He turns his attention to the deregulation of the Swedish electricity market.

[Speaker 1]

Deregulation was pitched to the public with all this soaring rhetoric about economic pedagogy, increasing efficiency and utilizing the free market to lower prices for everyday consumers.

[Speaker 2]

But he cuts through all of that. You can deregulate the trading of electricity, but you cannot deregulate the physical infrastructure. There is only one set of power lines running to your house.

[Speaker 1]

It's a natural monopoly.

[Speaker 2]

Right. So a company like Fordham gains control of the grid in a major region like Stockholm. They effectively become a toll booth operator on a road you have no choice but to drive on.

[Speaker 1]

And the results were staggering. Overall electricity prices spiked 64 percent over a few years.

[Speaker 2]

And in areas where Fordham held dominance, like Stockholm, they hiked prices by 40 percent.

[Speaker 1]

And it wasn't just that prices went up. It was where that money was going. The infrastructure itself was left to crumble.

He documents how entire communities were left without power for days after winter storms.

[Speaker 2]

Because the newly deregulated companies had slashed maintenance budgets to maximize profits.

[Speaker 1]

Meanwhile, the executive class was taking home astronomical sums.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. Fordham executives, like Michael Lillias, received massive bonuses. Lillias got up to \$85 million S.E.K. for himself.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, wow.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah. And billions were shared, among others. Guyou calls this growing director class the new nobility.

[Speaker 1]

And there's this incredible moment of corporate hubris he highlights. A high-ranking executive goes on national television and is pressed by a journalist about these bonuses while citizens are

sitting in freezing homes with no power.

[Speaker 2]

And the executive calmly replies that the public's anger is just a pedagogical problem.

[Speaker 1]

Guyou absolutely eviscerates that specific phrase.

[Speaker 2]

How so?

[Speaker 1]

Well, he traces the word pedagogy back to its Greek origins, which relate to the instruction and guiding of children. By using that word, the executive is framing the public as ignorant children who simply don't understand the brilliance of the free market.

[Speaker 2]

Unbelievable.

[Speaker 1]

Guyou translates the executive's true meaning. We need to teach the childlike public that extracting wealth from the infrastructure their taxes built and funneling it into our own pockets is an economic necessity.

[Speaker 2]

It is the ultimate sleight of hand. While society is tearing itself apart over phantoms, satanic cults, exaggerated terror cells, cultural proxy wars, a new corporate nobility is quietly enacting one of the largest transfers of public wealth in modern history.

[Speaker 1]

Deregulation wasn't an economic inevitability. It was an ideological raid on the public treasury, executed while the guards were looking the other way.

[Speaker 2]

And that is the synthesis of Yang Guyou's contrarian method. You have to follow the money and map the power dynamics. Do not let moral panics dictate your focus.

[Speaker 1]

Right. The war on terror was used as a crowbar to pry open civil liberties. The media's endless hunt for villains ruined innocent lives and distracted from institutional failures.

[Speaker 2]

And while everyone was terrified of these highly publicized threats, the very systems designed to serve the public were being hollowed out for private gain.

[Speaker 1]

Which brings us back to that person standing by the fire alarm panel, refusing to run.

[Speaker 2]

Exactly. From exposing media witch hunts to dismantling anti-terror paranoia to shining a light on quiet corporate plunder, this whole collection of texts is essentially a masterclass in resisting the dominant narrative.

[Speaker 1]

It's a reminder that the most dangerous threats to a society rarely arrive with blaring sirens. They usually arrive quietly while everyone is busy panicking about something else.

[Speaker 2]

And whether you agree with his ultimate political conclusions or find his targets offensive, that underlying contrarian instinct is essential.

[Speaker 1]

The insistence on stopping and asking, why are we really being told to fear this right now is a vital defensive muscle for any functioning democracy, especially when we are constantly bombarded with narratives designed to provoke our anxieties.

[Speaker 2]

So as you step away from this deep dive, take a moment to look at the fire alarms ringing in our own era. If the dominant unquestioned fears of the mid-2000s blinded society to the slow erosion of their civil liberties and the quiet extraction of their wealth, ask yourself, what is the overwhelming, undeniable panic of our current year? What is the one narrative that everyone agrees we must be terrified of?

And more importantly, who is quietly profiting while we are all distracted by the siren? Until next time, keep looking at the panel.