



Episode 935: Is Europe Hopeless for Liberty? Not So Fast

Guest: Martin Eriksson

WOODS: You're doing some interesting stuff and I want to hear all about it. So tell me about the Corax project. Give me the basics of what exactly it is and what makes it different from other – everybody's got some libertarian project he's working on and it lasts three months and it goes nowhere, we never hear about it again. So tell me about your project.

ERIKSSON: Yeah, sure. So our product has lasted for three years, almost three years, and Corax is libertarian media network, so we run a number of media outlets and we also act as a kind of incubator for libertarian media projects. So to give you some examples, our core service is a news aggregator. It's partly inspired by the Drudge Report and it looks kind of similar, but instead of being this kind of one-man operation with just a simple HTML page, Corax is crowdsourced by libertarians. And the English language version is available at Cor.ax. So most of our project, it originates in Sweden, so the English language version, the international versions are kind of embryonic at this stage.

But in Sweden, we do, for example, our news commentary podcast, which is our most successful project to date. It has some 3,000 or 4,000 listeners, which might not sound like much, but it's sort of huge in Sweden for a hardcore libertarian podcast. And we have different aggregators. We have one, for example, libertarian and libertarian-leaning blogs, and just now we're starting up our new podcast based on this aggregator. All in all, we have some 10, 15 different satellite projects and spinoffs, some really successful, some not as successful. It's sort of experimental.

We also have some very successful crowdfunding operations. So we have a subscription service, a kind of membership service similar to what you have. We have something like 1,000 members. And we also do regular crowdfundings for special projects. So we have a full-time staff of four, so we're quite successful and self-sufficient in financial terms. We also do live events, meet-ups, conferences, debates all over Sweden, and also notably here on Malta, the Corax conference on Malta.

WOODS: So who's the intended audience and what language are you broadcasting in?

ERIKSSON: Almost everything we do today is in Swedish, unfortunately. We're working on kind of transplanting the most successful projects from Sweden to an international audience, but in general our audience is really anyone interested in the news and, in particular, libertarian-minded people, libertarian-leaning people, conservative people,

perhaps. But it's really available to anyone, and the news aggregator is just basically a straight-up news service. It's useful for anyone.

WOODS: I'm interested in what you had to say about Malta. You snuck that in there. You said, "Here on Malta." Now, you're originally from Sweden?

ERIKSSON: Yes.

WOODS: You live in Malta now?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, that's right. Me and my fiancé relocated a couple of years ago, and this is due to the situation in our native Sweden. It's getting crazier by the day, and we felt we had to get out, if nothing else to be able to fight for a good future for Sweden. And this is actually sort of common for political activists in Sweden to actually operate from another country, so a lot of the good work is being done from Malta, from Berlin, from Budapest, from the U.S., etc. So Malta is a pretty great country in Europe. If you want to be in Europe, want to be in sort of a libertarian or libertarian-leaning place, Malta is really a great option. And for us, Malta is most of all just a normal country, a normal, old-fashioned country with a strong Catholic culture, traditional values, and none of the kind of ultra-progressive madness going on as in Sweden. Also the climate is great; it's an English-speaking country. So there's a lot of benefits to us, and there's a kind of growing libertarian expat community on Malta.

WOODS: That's very interesting. I didn't know anything about that. I know about Malta and I think the description that you just gave resembles what I've heard as well, but I didn't know about this libertarian community there, so that's good to know. I have a lot of things I want to ask you about your project, so I don't necessarily want to get us on a crazy detour, but do you want to say something about the situation in Sweden that would have actually led you to leave the country? I mean, not everybody is as much as a homebody as I am. I know a lot of people are more inclined to go elsewhere until they find what makes them happy, whereas I can't imagine ever leaving the U.S. It could get really crazy here, and yet I still feel such ties to it and I would always feel so much a stranger anywhere else, I just don't think I could ever bring myself to leave. So do you want to comment on that?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, certainly relocating to another country is not for everyone, and for sure, we encourage people to stay where they are and make the best out of their situation. But if you feel that you don't fit in, you're having issues, you don't feel welcomed, then you should also as part of your personal liberation project consider relocating. So in our case, we had that flexibility, that opportunity. We don't have to be in a particular place to work. It's easy to keep in touch with family because it's a short flight back and forth between Sweden and Malta; it's the same timezone and so on, so we don't become completely isolated from our families and friends. So it's not for everyone, but for us and for many others it's good. And the situation in Sweden is – I mean, it's a bit crazy in the U.S. too, but it's a lot crazier in Sweden.

WOODS: In my notes, I have written down I wanted to ask you about what you've said about your focus on entrepreneurial strategies rather than political activism and your approach to independent financing rather than operating as a nonprofit. So let's start with the first half of that. What do you mean by entrepreneurial strategies as opposed

to political activism? I know what political activism is, but what kind of entrepreneurial strategies do you have in mind?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, there's I guess at least two parts to this. To begin with, I have a personal background as a software entrepreneur. So when me and my partner, Sofia Arkestal, started the Corax project three years ago, the idea was to create a kind of activist software startup. I wanted to use the skill-set I accumulated in the IT business and apply it to some kind of libertarian project.

So for example, we hired a programmer from day one, and we had this idea that we could try to leverage software development. That's a bit of an unusual idea. And we also had the idea from the beginning that this should be a business. We should somehow make money out of it. We shouldn't be dependent on grants from think-tanks and so on, which is very common for libertarian projects.

So we do a lot of crowdsourcing generally and crowdfunding in particular, and we also try to encourage people to use these methods. But for example, the news aggregator we run, the backend of it is a Reddit-like system, where volunteer editors post links, write headlines, vote to decide what gets published, and so on. So we leverage a lot of people in our network to do this and it gives it great diversity in terms of what kind of links we have and so on. And we also have the crowdfunding projects. We've just been very successful.

But the other part of it is that we advocate entrepreneurship as a strategy, a strategy for liberation. So what we tell people is actually: don't be a political activist. Get out of politics if you're into politics. Just focus on being the best person you can be. Focus on your family, your friends. Start businesses. Contribute to your local communities. So we have this kind of localist approach, perhaps even a pacifist approach, but we focus a lot on getting people out of politics and into entrepreneurship and focusing on their own lives.

WOODS: Now, believe me, I'm very sympathetic to that and I talk a lot about that right here. But there's a part of me that thinks that we're just rolling over and playing dead if we do that, that if our voice is not anywhere to be heard in politics, there's no way we can ever be successful. So what is the path to success that you see? Or maybe the path is just individual success for each one of us. Maybe we don't have a kind of corporate success as libertarianism. I don't know what the strategy is, but I don't see how it gets carried out without at least one foot in politics, unless you can explain it.

ERIKSSON: Yeah, I think part of it is actually that if you create a good life for yourself, if you are able to live free on your own terms, then you have actually achieved the libertarian goal for yourself. As for a more overarching, societal, long-term strategy, I would say that, if nothing else, if we are to do any bigger project on a societal level, then we need resources, and particularly we need good people. So we need strong, self-sufficient people with their own businesses, with strong local communities. Otherwise, we don't have the resources to do anything ambitious. So we can't be stuck in kind of the normal mode of living. We need to break free first, maybe just a few of us, to build up a kind of base outside the normal terms. And then perhaps if we have enough business owners, for example, who are living freely and thinking

about these things, then I think our opportunities are much larger to do something for society at large.

WOODS: Now, what are you talking about with the nonprofit aspect? Because a lot of people do nonprofit stuff with libertarianism and you're not? And why not?

ERIKSSON: Well, it has to do basically with having a sustainable way of operating. If you're dependent on grants from foundations, think-tanks, etc., then obviously you're dependent on them; you're not as independent in terms of the ideas and what you do and so on. But it's also a matter of having a surplus that you can reinvest to grow it as a business, and I think this is a problem for many libertarian projects. They either stagnate or they just end when the funding ends from the big – maybe they had one or two patron organizations helping them out. But especially if you're a libertarian project, you need to kind of be independent, have your own finances so you don't kind of – everything just ends because someone decides to not give you any money anymore.

And also to grow it. So we've gone from first just the single programmer that we hired, and we didn't take any salaries or anything for ourselves, the founders. And then we hired an assistant, and now we're actually taking – me and my partner, Sofia, we're actually taking a small salary ourselves. So we've been able to grow it incrementally over three years, and I think this is a much stronger strategy, because we're not dependent on anyone today except our listeners, our readers, etc.

WOODS: Tell me first of all, in case there are people who are fluent in Swedish, what is the website? How do people get there to what you're doing?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, so anyone who's Swedish who's listening knows about our project. It's by far the largest libertarian project in Sweden. The website is Bubb.la, and from there you'll find all our different projects.

WOODS: Yeah, I'm looking at it right now, and of course I can't read it, but in a way it resembles the Drudge Report in its layout. You have a big headline at the top – was that really the model?

ERIKSSON: Yes, it's exactly the model. The design is kind of an homage to Drudge. And there's a lot of similarities, although our page is a lot more structured, the headlines are very different. We have a particular headline style that we follow in all cases. And so a lot of the inspiration comes from Drudge, not least of course the fact that he's so successful and so influential. He's having a huge impact just being one guy with a webpage, so that was really inspiring to us, how to have a lot of impact with very small means.

WOODS: Right, and of course one way to do that, as you say, is to have an aggregator where other people are producing the content. Drudge doesn't produce his own content. All Drudge does is link to things and come up with compelling headlines that make people want to click on those links and that make them keep wanting to come back to the Drudge Report and perhaps clicking on an ad. Now, I don't see any ads here. No, wait, do I? I do see some ads.

ERIKSSON: We do have some ads, although it's a very small part of our revenues.

WOODS: No doubt. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I mean, in order for ads like that to – you have to have an absolutely enormous traffic number. And of course Drudge does have that, so I'm sure he's doing extremely well. Even Amazon affiliate commissions must be very substantial for Drudge.

So right now – again, because I can't read this, I don't know if these are just straight news links, which some of them on Drudge are, or if you're getting people to different opinions. And if so, who are the people who are writing opinions that would be interesting to libertarians in Sweden? How much work in Sweden is being done in that language that your readers would want to read?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, so we have the site – it's called Frihetligt.se – for the Swedes listening, where we aggregate basically all the libertarian or even libertarian-leaning blogs that we can find in Sweden. I think there's about 40 of them at the moment which we consider kind of okay. Now and then they publish a good post. Some of them post good posts, several of them every day. So there's at least 40 good blogs, I would say, in the kind of alternative media sphere in Sweden. So that's not bad, really. But of course Swedes are fluent in English, so we read anything, and most of the links on this news aggregator is actually in English, by far the majority.

And then if you go to Corax, the actual Corax site, Cor.ax, you have the exact same thing but in English, with English headlines. So there you can get kind of a sample. So it's regular news links, just normal news outlets, blogs, alternative media, social media posts, press releases – really, whatever interesting fresh links we can find.

And the headline style is sort of particular. Clickbait is absolutely forbidden on our sites. So instead, the headlines are kind of long, detailed spoilers instead of teasers. So the idea is that you should get a pretty good idea of what's going on by just reading the headlines. You should never have to actually click the link to understand what the news item is about. So there's a particular style to it and a lot of thinking that goes into it. So that's the general idea of the aggregator, is really all kinds of information that we find interesting or relevant. Most of it is just straight-up news reported with a completely neutral tone.

WOODS: Well, you're having a conference on Malta July 28th through the 30th of this year, 2017, and as I look at at least the six speakers that I'm familiar with, it looks to me like the conference will be held in English.

ERIKSSON: Yes, certainly.

WOODS: Unless these people have really, really been brushing up on their Swedish, it looks to me like it's going to be in English. Now, the most notable speaker on that list is Hans Hoppe, so maybe you might say something about that. And by the way, you should – I have in vain tried to get him on – I tried to get him on *The Peter Schiff Show* when I used to host that, tried to get him on this show, and he's told me that he's more or less retired from audio interviews. He gave me a perfectly good reason that I shouldn't share, I suppose, but it's not good enough, you know? I want to get him

on. So get on his case while he's over there. "What's the matter with you? Do an interview with Woods." That's the quid pro quo. We talk about your project here on my show; you try to, I don't know, get him drunk. Get him drunk, get him to commit to something in writing, get him on my show.

So tell me why you would choose Hans Hoppe of all the libertarians in the world. He's highly controversial. In fact, just the other day – on Facebook is where you can find the hate Hoppe brigade. They're absolutely everywhere. They've never read one thing the guy has written. Not one thing. They've read three sentences that somebody sent them. They have no idea – If you were to ask them, "What are the problems with positivism and do you think Hans' arguments against positivism are effective?", you may as well be asking them about the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics. They haven't got the slightest idea of what you're talking about. So go ahead. Why Hans?

ERIKSSON: Well, for us we just began making a list of what would be the dream speakers at a libertarian conference, who would be absolutely the top wish if we could have anyone. And for us, Hoppe was the clear number one name on that list. That was the dream. So we got in touch with him, and we were really, really excited that he said yes, of course, obviously, since we know that he doesn't do a lot of conferences and interviews and so on. So that was really exciting. But for me, Hoppe is really the foremost libertarian thinker of our time by far. He's made so many contributions in terms of philosophy and history and political theory, so he's really the top mind of our movement, as far as I'm concerned. And that opinion is shared, of course, by many people in our project. So aiming for having Hoppe as keynote speaker was a really easy decision.

And I think the controversial debates around Hoppe, they're largely overblown. There's a lot of misunderstandings. As you say, the people who are criticizing him harshly, they've rarely read a line of his works. So I think there's a lot of misunderstandings and the things people are arguing about are not really relevant or substantial, although I think there's sort of an underlying thing that people are actually talking about, and that's what's the proper direction for the libertarian movement. Should we go in this kind of progressive, cosmopolitan, hedonist, modern direction in terms of our cultural stance, or should we go in a more conservative or traditional direction? And obviously Hoppe is one who has made the case that libertarianism has a sort of natural affinity to conservative ideas, that libertarianism and conservatism are parts of a greater whole and that you can't really have one without the other. So I think that's actually an interesting debate to have. My position on it is probably obvious by now. It's the same as I take Hoppe's position to be. But that's a fair discussion to have.

I think a lot of that stuff like discussions about physically removing people and so on, that's just based on simple misunderstanding of what Hoppe is writing about. I mean, obviously he's talking about privatist societies, covenant societies, he called them, so that should be completely uncontroversial for any libertarian, that a private community has the right to exclude people that they don't want to have in their community. I mean, if you don't agree to that, you're not a libertarian in any sense. So I think that's not really what the debate is about; it's more about the direction of libertarianism as a whole.

WOODS: Well, I don't want to mention any particular names that I have in mind because I'm fighting enough wars as it is and, you know, I've got other things to do at this point. But it looks to me like you're not necessarily just talking to people who share that view. I mean, I see at least one person that I think would not share that view.

ERIKSSON: Yeah, certainly. At the conference we're trying to gather all kinds of people, and generally we are a big-tent kind of project. Myself and other key members have this kind of conservative or traditionalist orientation, but we're a big-tent project and the conference is certainly intended to reflect kind of the whiff of the libertarian movement today.

So for example, we have Adam Kokesh, we have Julie Borowski, who is not part of the kind of hardcore, right-wing part of libertarianism, but they're really big names in libertarianism as a whole. And we also have Brendan O'Neill as a speaker, and I don't know if he calls himself a libertarian; he's a Marxist. He's a leftist, but he's a libertarian leftist and is a really interesting writer in the U.K. who's making a really strong stand for freedom of speech, civil liberties, and so on. So we're even trying to find common ground with kind of the sound people on the left, which Brendan O'Neill is an example of.

And then we have, for example, Matthew Reece, a really interesting blogger at The Zeroth Position, who is more the kind of radical, Hoppean type of libertarianism but from a younger generation, you might say. So we're trying to have not all kinds, perhaps, but many kinds of libertarianism, and we're very much kind of a friendly project, big-tent project, not sectarian. We try to be friends with everyone. We're not interested in picking fights with people. We caught some flack for inviting Hoppe, for example, in Sweden, but that doesn't really concern us.

WOODS: Yeah, nor should it. I mean, where has all this hypersensitivity gotten us? Oh, such and such group will be offended if we do X or Y. These people are going to be offended if you breathe, so go ahead and hold your conference, for heaven's sake. These people don't walk on eggshells, worry they're going to offend us, you know? Really. Just hold your conference, have the people you want to have. So that's the thrust of it. Gosh, a three-day conference. Is this expensive?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, it's very expensive to host a big conference with all the speakers and so on, so yeah, it's a high-risk project financially for us. We've tried to make up for it with ticket sales, sponsors, and so on, but it's a big project for sure. The biggest thing we do in a year is the annual conference.

WOODS: What's the — I'll put up a link also specifically to a page with information about the conference, but do you have — I assume you have such a page and that's easy to find?

ERIKSSON: Yes, that's Conf.Corax.News, and you'll also find the link from Cor.ax.

WOODS: Okay, all right, so we'll make sure and get that up. So what are your goals? What are your ambitions? Where do you want to go from here?

ERIKSSON: So one of our goals is to build a kind of global libertarian media empire, if you will. So there's a lot of big media organizations, but all of them are kind of mainstream. None of them are libertarian. So it might sound a bit unappetizing at first, but imagine, for example, if we could create a libertarian Fox News, that kind of size of the organization, that kind of impact. That would be really interesting. That might start to turn things around, I think. And of course we're not going to get there overnight, so we need to do this in a kind of incremental process with bootstrapping, which is what we do a lot. We start really small with an aggregator, for example, and then we build something else on top of the aggregator and one thing leads to the next. So we're trying to, with this kind of entrepreneurial, experimental approach, see if we can build a big media organization, a big media network.

And we've done pretty well in Sweden. We've done actually much better than we expected when we started some three years ago. So some of the next steps for us involve taking this to an international level – not all of it, but the things that were the most successful, the kind of runaway successes that we had in Sweden. We're going to try to take them to a global audience and see if we can build a big, strong, profitable media company. So that's the core goal of Corax.

And the point of that is to obviously influence debate in general, ideas, but an important goal is also to influence other media outlets, so we think that if we show other media reporters and media bosses and so on that it's actually possible to report on the news from a libertarian angle and that it's actually an interesting angle, we think – and we think we're also seeing already some examples of this in Sweden – that people actually pick up our perspectives, our ways of reporting, actually lifting up a certain type of news instead of just burying it and ignoring it. So we're trying to have impact on the media sector in general.

WOODS: Is there anything else that we've left out that you want to talk about with regard to what you're up to?

ERIKSSON: Well, I'm always very happy to say we're looking for volunteers –

WOODS: I was going to ask you about that. How would the people reach you if they did want to help?

ERIKSSON: Yeah, so we're looking for volunteer editors to run the news aggregators. That's usually the first step to get involved in the project. And from there you can find a ton of different things to do. But the first step is to send an email to info@cor.ax and just introduce yourself and tell us that you're interested in talking to us and maybe getting involved. There's a lot of interesting stuff to do, interesting people in the project. And in particular, we're really eager to grow the international part of the team. We do have an English language editorial team with people from all over the world, but it needs to grow. And also in the future, we're going to do for example an English language version of the news commentary podcast, since that has been really popular in Sweden and we think it's a unique concept, even from an international perspective. But we need people to work with the podcast, to talk on the podcast obviously, and similarly with other projects we have in Sweden. So there's a lot of stuff going on, a lot of people, projects, resources. But we need people, especially people who are not in Sweden to help us out in this.

WOODS: All right, so I hope this goes really well for you, and I'm –

ERIKSSON: Thank you.

WOODS: – unfortunately these days not very accustomed to having somebody on who is telling me good news about some great thing he's working on. It's usually some disaster here or there. So I'm glad and I'm glad to be able to have a variety here on the show. I want more stuff like this. So again, let's recap now. People want to look at your stuff and/or contact you, once again give us the links they would need.

ERIKSSON: Yeah, it's Cor.ax. That's the main website. And from there, you'll find everything. You'll find the email addresses, the links to the conference, and so on. So that's the most important thing, Corax, Cor.ax. And that's really the best way. And if you want to get involved, just send us an email at info@cor.ax and we'll talk about it.

WOODS: Are you going to be recording the conference?

ERIKSSON: Yes, we will be recording everything, hopefully also with a video component. If nothing else, definitely audio. And we'll livestream it and it will be available afterwards, but only for paying subscribers. This will be a kind of product that we're selling. So it's actually possible now to buy access to the recordings from last year's conference, also in English language. That was the first annual Corax conference with the – I think it's eight recorded sessions. So this will be a kind of commercial project for us. So it's possible to buy access and it will be possible to listen to Hans Hoppe's lecture and so on.

WOODS: Well, I know I do have a number of European listeners, but of course naturally most of my listeners are in the U.S., so I would just say Malta, it's a last-minute trip, but Malta's a wonderful place to visit and what a great excuse it would be to get over there just to go to this conference. So again, I know there isn't that much time, but what the heck? Be impulsive. Live free, you know? Follow these little slogans.

ERIKSSON: It's really a great place for a small vacation. It's easy to improvise on Malta. It's really easy to get around. The climate is perfect. People are friendly. It's inexpensive. Plenty of opportunities for sightseeing, interesting architecture, going to the beach, diving, and so on. And it's an interesting country, a kind of libertarian-ish country in Europe, so that's also something worth seeing.

WOODS: Well, anyway, best of luck. I hope it's a very successful event and I hope you're able to fulfill the ambitions you have for the organization, Cor.ax. And then let's see how far you can spread and get a bigger English language component in it, and the sky's the limit. So TomWoods.com/935 is the show notes page for today. For anybody who doesn't remember your link, I'll have it there. Thanks again. I really appreciate it, Martin.

ERIKSSON: Thanks for having me on, and I promise to put in a good word for you with Hoppe.

WOODS: [laughing] Thank you.