

Words To Win By

Episode 2: Equal Rights Under Law: Operation Libero Defeating the Far Right

Audio Player

Transcript

Laura Zimmermann:

It's, it's dark outside and it's not, uh, getting easier. So there are times where you wanna quit and where you just wanna, you know, say I've had enough of this. What gets me going is if, if we don't do it, no one else will do it. and no one else will bring the change that is, um, this is, that is so deeply needed. It's social obligation.

Theme Song:

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing? And so many others, three by way they reply, I say a Fool, such as I who sees this song is Somewhere to begin.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Welcome to Words to Win By. Today we're headed to Switzerland, where in 2016, a tenacious group of campaigners confronted and beat back the far right Swiss People's Party and their anti-immigrant nationalist agenda. Laura Zimmermann, who you heard at the top, is the co-president of Operation Libero. We'll also be talking to her colleagues, Stefan Manser-Egli, also co-president and Adrian Mahlstein, co-founder and director of campaigns. Operation Libero is a grassroots progressive political movement founded in 2014 in response to the scapegoating and vilification of immigrants at the core of the Swiss People's Party. Here's Laura on the storyline The Swiss Peoples Party is selling to the public

Laura Zimmermann:

In, in general right wing populism works because it, you know, it promises easy solution to c solutions to complex problems. In Switzerland, it's even more dangerous because they were a very strong party. They were the strongest party. They still are the strongest party in Parliament, and they had the power to make initiative after initiative to, you know, kind of be in a permanent campaign mode and, you know, feed this narrative of the foreign immigrants and, uh, very, uh, mean and bad European Union. And, you know, the populist campaign framework works with very easy enemy narratives, and that's something that, uh, was fed for, for a very long time in the Swiss discourse.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

That's right wing populism 101, pick some other to vilify or scapegoat. Effective political arguments, like any other tale, require an origin story, an explanation for the listeners of why things are the way they are a source of the pain or frustration or anxiety you feel. And they also need heroes and villains. Any compelling narrative has those. And the Swiss People's Party, in

many ways was Europe's most successful right wing populace. They set the mold that many others followed. They had been on a roll for 15 years, winning initiative after initiative, always putting nativist sentiment at the heart of their messaging, promising up themselves as the heroes who were going to protect the Swiss people, as their name indicates from outsiders, whether they were foreigners, Muslims, or the European Union itself. Stefan joined Operation Libero in 2015 and is still doing this work as a volunteer while he also pursues a PhD in transnational studies.

Stefan Manser-Egli:

Actually, the Swiss people's party won a couple of initiatives before that in 2010, the one that went before for the expulsion of criminal foreigners in 2009, they won a ban on minarets, which caused some kind of outcry as well on a global scale. And then on 2014, they won this mass immigration initiative.

Anat Shenker-Osorio: :

Yes, minarets. The towers built into mosques

News Clip:

On November the 29th. They will forbid the building of Islamic towers attached to prey and Centers. The, the posters used during the campaign have offended the country's Muslim community of about 400,000 people. Luk is a member of the Swiss parliament and the leader of the initiative to ban the construction of new minerals. Mr. Luk, why there was a need to call for referendum to ban the construction of minarets in Switzerland.

News Clip:

You see, we have with, uh, Islam some, uh, serious problems in Switzerland. And so we had to, uh, to take the minarets as the symbol of political islamization in the center and start this initiative against minerals. Everybody who looks for one second to the poster understands what it is. We are free people, we have our meanings, our opinions, and we discuss it it openly.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

At the time of the ban, there were four Yes, that's right for minarets in all of Switzerland. The push to block the construction of minarets was intended to make them a symbol because the Swiss People's Party was hoping that they could gin up fear the same way they always do. By pedaling the notion that Muslims would somehow be in conflict with Swiss values. They developed posters that positioned the minarets as if it were a missile that was going through and attacking Switzerland. When not attacking architecture, the Swiss People's Party focuses squarely on their favored target immigrants.

In 2014, the party introduced a referendum calling for the automatic expulsion of foreigners who had been convicted of certain kinds of serious crimes. And let's be clear, by foreigners, they meant anyone without a Swiss passport. This could mean someone who had been living in the

country for generations, because in Switzerland, unlike the United States, they don't have birthright citizenship. Simply being born on Swiss soil does not render you eligible for a Swiss passport. That referendum passed easily, and the Swiss Parliament put it into law. Then in 2015, the Swiss People's Party made major gains in Parliament again, as ever, with an anti-immigrant approach front and center

News Clip:

Switzerland has taken a slight to the right, according to political pundits, after projection showed the anti-immigration Swiss People's Party set for a record win, taking over 29% of the vote. SVP leader Tony Bruno, said his party was obviously in touch with voters' concerns. I can say that the Swiss people want to put migration at the center of this election, and they don't agree with the other parties, with the government, and with the parliament, we know how to handle this refugee crisis. While the others act like there isn't a problem.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Fresh off this electoral triumph, they introduced a new initiative. This new initiative would call for the automatic deportation of people deemed immigrants for any criminal offense, no matter how minor the Swiss People's Party was powerful. And this nativist sentiment was baked in and incredibly effective with voters. So it's little wonder that opposition parties and even major NGOs, they didn't wanna take up this fight. Adrian was one of the co-founders of Operation Libero. When this whole thing began,

Adrian Mahlstein:

I, I guess most parties were like, yeah, feeling they they couldn't win that and thinking they lost it before they even got started.

Anat Shenker-Osorio: :

But how could this new grassroots player take on this fight, especially when other major actors weren't really getting in the ring? Here's Stefan and Laura.

Stefan Manser-Egli:

Couple of young people got together and said, well, that cannot happen in Switzerland, that these popular initiatives get accepted and we have to do something against it.

Laura Zimmermann:

We were very optimistic that we, uh, the, the newly formed political movement can beat, um, the Swiss populist party by them, by their own weapons.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

They intentionally didn't set out to create a new party. There were too many of those already, and they wanted to do something different. So it was with this attitude that a young political movement aligned with Swiss values set out to change the political conversation. Here's the team describing the early days of the campaign.

Laura Zimmermann:

As we realized back in 2014, you know, classical traditional parties failed to have an answer against this very dangerous initiative. And, uh, we very much realized that we have to do something on our own. And at the beginning, we didn't have anything. We didn't have any money. I think we had 10,000 Swiss Francs from some parents.

Stefan Manser-Egli:

We had no office, we had no paid people. We were just a bunch of young people.

Adrian Mahlstein:

There were some talks, and afterwards we found each other, um, managed to set up a core team of about 15 people, which then distributed tasks. And, um, we built up this organization. So we like wrote, uh, our position text, worked on content, um, what our topics would be, um, founded a an association, um, prepared all the, like a video and the, and an appeal to start off with. And we planned everything until then we got public. And yeah, it was, it, it started quite furiously. Like we didn't expect all of that, but, but there was a lot of, um, media attention since the beginning.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

As you've heard, Operation Libero was a small, dedicated group and a startup at that with a huge formidable opponent. So they truly had to hone in on their strategy, who they were going to try and move, and using which messages delivered through which specific channels and messengers.

Stefan Manser-Egli:

So the first thing we were thinking about is that we have to win like the middle. So you think there is like this 30, 40% in the middle that we have to convince that this is, uh, that this is wrong, that this is, uh, a dangerous initiative. And so we thought, well, how are we gonna do this? There has been like scapegoating of foreigners for 20, 30 years at least. And so they were really trained in that. So I think just this framing, as you put it, it's like maybe the oldest framing that exists on immigrants, on, on scapegoating immigrants. And I think to counter that on the same terms, like using the good immigrant or immigrants who are good examples is extremely difficult. Just to, to counter in the first place.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Operation Libero recognized, if they attempted to confine themselves to a debate about whether immigrants are good or bad, a strategy that had already proven a failure in previous initiatives in the last election, they would be arguing on the opposition's terms. The Swiss People's Party wanted to have the conversation be about interrogating the actions, character and behavior of immigrants, and utilizing the standard progressive approach of telling stories and showing heart tugging images of good immigrants would have just been falling into that trap. What this framing does at best is offer a chance at sympathy, at having people feel sorry for those people who are being subjected to these horrible measures. But sympathy is by definition, still casting

immigrants as other. It is a tacit acceptance of the right wing frame. And since the opposition had more money, more access to media and a 30 year head start stoking feelings about immigrants arguing inside this frame wasn't likely to succeed. Indeed it had already failed many times over. If they weren't going to lead with who immigrants are, how could Operation Libero reframe this debate?

Stefan Manser-Egli:

We have to tell the Swiss voter actually that it something is at stake. That con is their concern as well, namely their democracy, their rule of law, what they hold really dear. And this is how you have to get like the middle rather conservative Swiss voter to, to reject this initiative.

Laura Zimmermann:

It was a bit over the top, I think for what even conservative Swiss people would think is, you know, okay to do. And, uh, we wanted to talk about that. You know, we wanted to talk about, uh, what this does to a society if you, um, start to hurt these pillars very badly for a certain minority group. We used the Constitution, you know, I would say as the kind of rule book that we live in as a society. We wanted to remind, um, the Swiss people where Switzerland comes from, that Switzerland has always been a country of immigrants and they made Switzerland strong and Switzerland is a strong country because, and not despite of all the immigrants. And, and, uh, we also wanted to state out that, uh, we have rules in a country that apply to anyone and also rights that apply to anyone is so you cannot just expose a quarter of the society from basic rights of the rule of law. So you have to write for a fair trial. We have to write, uh, to defend yourself.

Stefan Manser-Egli:

So we said, well, we're gonna talk about the rule of law, about fundamental rights, about, uh, separation of power.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

They brought that to life through various approaches from digital ads, to training volunteers, to combat disinformation, to posters. And they always used compelling visuals.

Stefan Manser-Egli:

We decided that in terms of the language and the visuals and, uh, the wording we're gonna use, we're just gonna use it, uh, do it as them, namely by using really, um, harsh colors. Like we had this poster with red and white, uh, so the Swiss national colors and black. Um, we had a wording that said like, this initiative is destroying Swiss values. Um, and we had like helvetia, this is like the prominent Swiss figure crashed by a wrecking ball.

Ad Clip

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

As Stefan mentioned. What we're seeing in that video is helvetia, a Swiss emblem. And so the ad begins with this positive upswell of emotion, a values-based opening, and then she gets smashed dramatically and written on the wrecking ball that is destroying her, is the name of this

initiative, essentially conveying that this would be the total destruction of Swiss values. With this ad and their overall approach, Operation Libero was reclaiming what the Swiss People's Party purports to represent the people, the nation. The campaign was wrapping itself in the red and white of Switzerland claiming that this initiative was a violation not just of immigrants, but of the nation itself. And their message was taking off. Suddenly everyone was talking about it on Facebook, and the public discourse around the initiative was shifting. People were talking about whether if you steal an apple from your neighbor, that should be enough to get you deported. And because it was working, the Swiss People's Party started freaking out and trying to figure out how to contest it. They sent around an incredibly expensive colored leaflet to every single Swiss home. Here's Adrian on dealing with that.

Adrian Mahlstein:

Well, one thing, uh, that was quite successful was, um, the SVP sent out to every household in Switzerland, a fact sheet or like a flyer. And, um, we picked that up and, uh, published a fact check with, uh, the "Five Biggest Lies", um, about the initiative. We, we did it - this very quickly. So this was sent out the day before and we already published the response on the next day and sent this out and then said, look, this is what day, um, they wanna tell you, and it's everything wrong. We don't have the money to bring that out because we were actually a very small organization. But bring that out. Tell this everybody, um, spread it as, as much as you can and, um, this fact check this, it, it was very, very successful.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

What's fascinating about this approach is that on the face of it, it might look like a violation of the advice not to negate. We know this lesson well, what you negate, you actually evoke. Most pointedly, for example, it's really bad to say immigrants are not criminals or immigrants are not taking our jobs. When you do that, studies show people recall the assertion, but they can't remember whether it was true or false. You're simply recementing a top of mind connection between the word immigrant and the word criminal. But what it's important to understand about that advice, and this is subtle I grant you, is that that negating advice is about not repeating what the opposition says about you. What Operation Libero was doing instead was contending with the claims the opposition was making about themselves, about their own initiative. And they did so by inputting truths in the exact same visual space where the lies resided, not by unwittingly reaffirming the lies, by negating them.

In essence, they used a persuasive mechanism known in academic literature as the poison parasite defense without even realizing it. The poison parasite defense is when you layer your true statement, your correction on top of the opposition's false claim. And in doing that, what testing of this process shows is that when people see the opposition claim in the wild without your rebuttal, your correction still springs to mind. It attaches like a parasite to the hosting opposition language, and viewers are subtly reminded of it anytime they see the original. And since the opposition has so much more money and therefore reach, this is a way to get your message across even when you cannot actually get it directly in front of people. A simple version of this is known as brand hijacking. This was made famous, for example, an anti-smoking print ads made to look exactly like old Marlboro ones where two cowboys get

depicted on top their horses with one saying to the other, I miss my long bob. Then when people would see an actual Marlboro spot, they would be subtly reminded of this messaging. In this way, both Operation Libero and this anti-smoking campaign were able to defang the opposition's message without even saying anything. In addition to using the poison parasite defense in print Operation, liberal used the opposition's words against them in video.

Adrian Mahlstein:

And there's a, there is a very good example of, of, of one guy or, or one politician saying that, well, actually I don't know what's written in this initiative, you know, that. And, and, and we took that, you know, thank you and, and put that out there. You know, he just didn't care. But this video was, was highly successful. This is really the, the, the recipe for, for success of the SVP for years. I mean, they come up with stuff everybody gets, you know, crazy about it, talks about it, pushes it into the news, and, and, and finally, you know, it, it still works nowadays. It's not that, that they continue with it and, and still and still people fall into the trap.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Again. Operation Libero wasn't reposting a video of the Swiss People's Party, uttering anti-immigrant diatribes. Giving that more page views and airtime is utterly destructive and something far too common in left wing circles, what they were showing is an opposition politician demonstrating his own ignorance, not spewing hateful rhetoric that never merits repeating. What Operation Libero was writing, in essence was a new rule book for combating what we now know as disinformation. So what Operation Libero did was they harnessed the power of social media to get their messaging across. That was a space the Swiss People's Party wasn't really operating in at the time. And part of that involved training an entire cadre of folks who understood the internet deeply and could get into spaces where people were spreading disinformation. Then these volunteers would come in and correct it in a calm and civil way.

Adrian Mahlstein:

We saw that chest afterward, but it really spread out a lot and, and was, was really successful. And we did the same thing with, with other, um, like videos, talks. They, they told wrong things. We picked that up, we cut out the videos, put facts on it, and said, Hey, look, this is what they, they tell you bullshit. Don't believe it will know. And, and, and this was one part of the tactic, um, which got a lot of attention. And I think it came to a point where the, uh, the adversary was, was quite concerned to tell wrong things because they knew we were watching them

Stefan Manser-Egli:

Before the campaign. The, the poll said at 66 in favor of the campaign. Then the second poll was still kind of at 61 or something really a lot in favor. And then the last poll was actually quite close. It said, I guess 51% in favor of the, of the initiative. Um, and so yeah, towards the end it was surprisingly clear, I would say, I mean, we would've been happy with, uh, any victory.

Adrian Mahlstein:

I think that's a big thing because it, it, it, at the beginning it really looked we would lose that. And then, uh, things changed really drastically.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

On February 28th, 2016, the Swiss people went to the polls and the answer was clear.

News clip:

It's a no. Swiss voters have rejected a right-wing proposal to expel foreign law breakers. In a referendum, 58.9% of those who took part came out against automatic deportations. Turnout was put at more than 62%. The result Han a defeat to the country's dominant anti-immigration Swiss People's Party

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Operation. Liberal has since gone on to win a lot of new campaigns, including a 2016 referendum to protect marriage equality and creating an easier path to naturalization for third generation immigrants. Operation Libero won these fights by refusing to have the opposition's argument, but instead standing on their own terms, invoking their own frame. They dealt with disinformation by smartly arming folks to tell the truth both online and in response to the propaganda that the party sent out across the country.

So what do we learn here? We learned that an incredibly small new on the scene, grassroots, barely even funded largely volunteer force can confront right wing populism by speaking authentically to the values that almost all voters care about. And by staring straight into the face of disinformation and recognizing that just as nature abhors a vacuum, so does online chatter. And one of the ways that falsehoods and propaganda proliferate is when we do not fill in for our audiences what is actually true. If the right wing can continue to gain traction by peddling their lives and keeping their base engaged and enraged, we can certainly fight back by keeping our much larger populations who do care about our values, who do want to stand with and for each other, armed with the truth.

Words to Win By is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Grace Lynch, Brittany Martinez and Sundus Hassan Nooli with editorial support from Ale Tejada, Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Liz Brown, Anthony Torres, and Jillian Marcells. Our executive producers are Jenny Kaplan and me, Anat Shenker-Osorio. Our theme music is written by T. R. Richie, produced and arranged by Dan Leon. If your words don't spread, they don't work, so please let others know and rate and review the show wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Theme Song:

A song is somewhere to begin to search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done. And a song, it's somewhere to begin.