

Alkemio Presents: An Invitation to Bridge the Spaces Between Us.

Written and narrated by Paul Skinner.

The journey ahead

Jorge Heymann, an Argentinian creative director, was about to receive what may have been the client brief of his career.

He had been invited to meet an entrepreneur with a vision to transform a previously overlooked district in Buenos Aires.

Alberto L. González, a property developer, had lined up everything that the neglected area would require to become a beacon of regeneration.

The only thing missing was the people needed to work there, enjoy their leisure time together there, and form the community needed to bring the vision to life.

Heymann was therefore given a clear challenge: to create the concept for an advertising campaign compelling enough to solve the problem by raising awareness among everyone whom they would have to reach.

He took a few days to think about it, during which time he mixed with and talked to people who were among the target market for the new mixed-use development.

When he returned to Alberto's office, the developer was keen to see Jorge's idea for the campaign that would make his initiative a success. But to his dismay, the ad man replied that he didn't have one to show him.

'What do you mean, Alberto asked? We are about to launch and the whole investment will be a write-off if no one comes!'

To his surprise Jorge replied: 'You don't need an ad campaign: you need a bridge!'

Heyman had learned that most of the people they sought to attract would have to take a long walk, several different buses or a drive through congested traffic to make it to the new destination, which was separated from their neighbourhoods by a body of water that was particularly awkward to get around. Finding a way to make it easier to access the new development would therefore be far more valuable for far longer than simply telling them that it was there.

Being a top creative, he also advocated for making it not just any old bridge but a truly iconic landmark that would become a real talking point in its own right.

The internationally renowned architect Santiago Calatrava was commissioned to build what ultimately became 'La Puente de la Mujer'. The rotating footbridge is now a defining feature of the city landscape, which put the new development, Puerto Madero, well and truly on the

map and in 2018 was even declared a Cultural Heritage of the City of Buenos Aires. More importantly, the district has gone from being one of the most neglected in the city to becoming one of the most successful waterfront renewal projects in the world with a thriving community of people who have made it one of the trendiest spots in the capital.

Progress, whether along literal or imaginative pathways, is shaped by our environment. We formulate our intentions in the light of the possibilities for change that we can see.

We can't impose mass behaviour change. But we can unlock systemic shifts by making subtle but powerful changes to the contexts in which we interact that make it easier for valuable new perceptions and behaviours to emerge and gain momentum.

Our most pressing priorities, from addressing the climate emergency, to resolving conflict, or fostering democratic renewal, are most fundamentally challenges of cooperation. We can emerge from them better and more resilient than we go into them if only we can find the right way to share in the benefits of working together. It has therefore never been more important to move towards each other.

We are however increasingly driven to do the opposite of this, falling into entrenched positions and further separation as we fight for our own interests in fear of win-lose interactions in which we believe we must succeed at the expense of others or face similar losses ourselves.

Our fractured world of accelerating inequalities and a seemingly diminishing capacity to adequately confront society's most fundamental problems could be blamed upon the 'bad apples' we have as leaders. We could blame the voters and shareholders who support these leaders and say that the problem is a 'bad barrel'. But an even deeper and more systemic insight may be available: what if the problem is that key aspects of our current environment function as a 'bad barrel maker'?

Today's technologies create an environment that too often divides us rather than unites us. Partly this is a matter of polarising algorithms that amplify disagreement and are the opposite of the bridging algorithms we need to overcome the differences between us. Partly this is about the over-riding ideology and ownership structure of big tech that focuses perceptions on short-term individual gain at the cost of long-term mutual loss, creating powerful ratchet effects from which it is hard to escape. And partly it is about data which could be used to maintain autonomy and unlock cumulative public benefit but instead becomes appropriated by companies that turn their users into the product and restrict the gains that can come of it to private ends. But perhaps of even greater significance than the errors of commission amid today's digital architecture may be the errors of omission: the lack of technology designed to focus our attention specifically on addressing the key challenges of cooperation and collaboration that we face.

The good news is that there may be an opportunity to escape from the polarising effects of social media, overcome the limitations of short-term profit maximisation and reverse the diminution of the commons by introducing just such a new element: a digital bridge that

focuses our perceptions on the problems we share with others and the challenge of working together to tackle them for mutual benefit.

As American systems theorist Buckminster Fuller said, 'If you want to teach people a new way of thinking, don't bother trying to teach them. Instead give them a tool, the use of which will lead to new ways of thinking'.

Such a bridge may support those among us who are most inclined to cross that gap, making it easier for them to do so and to connect with others who are willing to take that journey with them. By connecting these change-makers, reducing the obstacles in their way and amplifying the actions that they can achieve together, we can support them in finding new pathways to better. This can re-direct systems at the heart of government, the public sector, education, private enterprise and civil society towards greater inclusion, resilience and prosperity.

The philosopher Emanuel Lévinas argued that contemplating another person's mind is the closest thing we can get to the experience of infinity. They could be thinking anything while we remain hermetically sealed in our own awareness. By providing a technology that leaders can use to get closer to their stakeholders we build a metaphorical bridge to the unbounded gains that can emerge from mobilising the perceptions, actions and commitments of the world of people outside our control but within our potential scope of access and influence.

In so doing we can restore our trust in each other, belief in the possibilities of progress and confidence that tomorrow can be better than today.

Introducing Alkemio

When COVID-19 broke out, Neil Smyth and René Honig experienced the clear lack of a platform to enable cross-boundary collaboration in meeting the needs of a population facing the biggest public health emergency in modern history.

The context of the pandemic made clear that we needed to pull together across sectors, communities, regions and even nations to address a whole of society threat with a whole of society response. The young were asked to limit their opportunities in ways which primarily served the needs of more vulnerable older generations; the relationship between government and businesses changed to save economies while prioritising health; the over-riding priorities driving our daily routines and behaviours shifted dramatically as a majority of the world's population came to live in conditions of lock down.

But the experience brought a more universal perspective to life: the main hurdle facing humankind may be that we have shared problems but organisations, institutions and workflows designed for individual solutions. This means that we often fail to respond adequately to complex challenges that stem from multiple causes and that require the participation of a variety of actors, such as tackling inequalities of educational attainment or increasing food security.

This misalignment can act as a barrier to building the right solutions to our most pressing problems, leading to duplicated efforts, counter-productive actions and missed

opportunities. This can erode social value, hinder productivity, undermine democratic systems and ultimately even present us with a rising frequency of potentially existential challenges.

Neil and René therefore set to work on developing a platform to enable effective collaboration across organisations and sectors, based on the premise that the focus should always be directed at the problems to be solved rather than just on the internal priorities of any individual organisation. This was intended to make it easier for people to contribute solutions from any stakeholder group or background and to navigate collectively towards shared goals.

Alkemio is the Netherlands-based steward-owned tech for good enterprise that they created to achieve this. Its founders both have a track record of entrepreneurial success and they have demonstrated their commitment to Alkemio's mission with personal investment in the business and through a steward-owned governance structure which guarantees the pursuit of its purpose. Alkemio will always work in support of collaboration for the common good and it is aligned with the transition to mission-oriented approaches to government and with the pursuit of United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 17, which recognizes the importance of working in partnership across government, private enterprise and civil society to achieve a sustainable future. Indeed, the fact that only 17% of the targets established across the Sustainable Development Goals are on track itself indicates the need for much more effective collaboration.

The Alkemio beta-stage flagship platform now already provides shared 'Spaces' for collective problem-solving. And the company is further building the platform and an associated infrastructure to provide a European ethical alternative to U.S. big tech. It is now raising investment to deploy its technology in a variety of products dedicated to specific user contexts and goals, which could range from tackling the integration of refugees to providing affordable housing.

Alkemio believes society now faces some of the biggest opportunities:

- since the emergence of a post WWII order to build governments and public sectors that more fully work with, through and for the people they serve.
- since the industrial revolution to build a truly stakeholder approach to enterprise;
- and since the digital revolution to re-direct our tech environment for greater good.

Alkemio seeks to play its part by making it easier for groups to come together across society to make the most of these opportunities through their work across organisational and sectoral boundaries, each defining the next generation of change in their own contexts. And unlike big tech, Alkemio exists to unlock rather than capture value, and will never exploit data shared on its platform.

Changing systems changes lives

Meet Sophie.

As mayor, she is leading her city region to greater sustainability but has struggled with finding ways to support the transition to clean energy because it's not something over which she has much control.

That changed when she established a set of Alkemio Spaces to accelerate the development and adoption of green hydrogen technology by fostering collaboration between academia, government and industry. A large multinational corporation partnered with the city to explore the deployment of green hydrogen with fuel cell technology, aiming to decarbonize public sites and strengthen research and innovation clusters. And a local university is partnering with a coalition of small and medium sized businesses to explore how green hydrogen can replace natural gas in industry processes as well as how it can be safely stored and used to power the electrical grid when other forms of clean energy are less available. Other researchers and government leaders are now joining the Alkemio Spaces to learn how they can replicate this success. The project has incredible potential to improve people's health with cleaner air, as well as to create jobs and provide greater energy security and climate mitigation.

Citizens in Sophie's city region are also enrolled in a pilot programme to put users at the heart of public services. This began with a collaboration that supports people with long-term mental health issues in accessing healthcare interventions combined with workplace coaching to tackle the issue of long-term health-related unemployment. A local marketing services agency has also shifted from supporting client enterprises in simply communicating to their stakeholders to instead enabling them to actively involve their stakeholders in co-creating a future that they can aspire to together. A community climate hub has led a nationwide coalition of similar hubs aiming to put climate education, volunteering and green rental and repair centres on every high street. And a cohort of older people are participating in a trial of new digital technologies to empower them to live independently for longer as part of an E.U. programme to support ambulant assisted living across populations with ageing demographics. In each of these cases, the innovation has come from working across rather than within stakeholder groups and organisational boundaries to reach outcomes that none of the organisations or groups could have achieved from working in isolation.

Today this sketch is illustrative. But Alkemio is already beginning to make opportunities such as these possible in practice. Through its early work with government, educational institutions and the private sector, it is providing dedicated digital homes for a growing range of pioneering multi-stakeholder collaborations and partnerships. These enable seamless participation in real-time and from all parties and allow goals to be reached that can only be achieved through collective action.

These kinds of challenges are present in cities right across the Netherlands, Europe and the world. Alkemio is highly scalable and is actively improved by network effects as it allows expertise to spread and actions to be adapted from Space to Space and case to case, creating more and more benefits for users and their stakeholders as it does so.

The key to them all is that changing the focus from internal priorities that may divide us to shared problems that unite us changes systems so that they change lives for the better. They establish the problems to be addressed and enable a shared situational understanding to emerge that reaches right across organisational boundaries and stakeholder groups. And this

enables all contributors to align their perceptions, ideas and actions to achieve results that can benefit everyone.

The need for new technology

The industrial revolution powered unprecedented economic growth but contained an inherent flaw: its carbon emissions and other pollutants created a physical environmental emergency or climate emergency that now threatens all human progress and demands a new order of cooperation.

The digital revolution has powered unprecedented opportunities for human connection but also contains an inherent flaw: its bias towards short-term profit maximisation, polarising algorithms, exploitative uses of data and capacity for spreading misinformation at the speed of A.I. have now led to an online environmental emergency, or what we may call a 'digital emergency'. This may now also threaten all human progress by undermining our capacity for healthy cooperation just when we need it most.

The proprietary online tools that we currently depend on also reinforce assumptions that we work within enclosed systems. They are seldom optimised for collaboration among different stakeholder groups or to support partnerships and innovation flows across multiple organisations.

Public services, engagement and consultation are delivered using tools that reflect internal reporting structures and which can fail to put the key challenges to be addressed at the centre of joined-up systems.

And vast dependencies are accruing on a small number of technology providers which can threaten the resilience of individuals, businesses, governments and ultimately entire domestic populations. This is especially true outside of the United States and China, including in Europe where dependencies on foreign technologies are now causing pressing concerns.

The limitations of incumbent systems are often 'hidden in plain sight' as people have become so used to them. But today's 'everything problems' require 'everyone solutions'.

We therefore urgently need technology that brings us together, rather than divides us and opens the door to breakthrough ways of working that can be made much more widely accessible.

Human cooperation is not complicated like a machine as economists might have us believe. Rather, it is complex, like all living things and emerges through the interactions between us. The key to correcting systemic failure is to lower the threshold to the adoption of desired alternative behaviours and practices, amplifying the change that progressive leaders can make and spreading the influence of these actions by making them more salient and replicable across communities and populations. This can ultimately lead to a phase transition from one predominant mode of activity to another. And it can be especially powerful when we design the environment in which we collaborate to focus our attention on shared problems and mutually beneficial pathways to resolution, through a new digital architecture.

A mission to connect and empower

Misinformation and the degradation of societal narratives may threaten our existence even more pressingly and fundamentally than the climate emergency by inhibiting our capacity to self-organise for mutual benefit. This now makes the need for protected spaces in which to collectively appraise the situations we face and create shared solutions with buy-in from all necessary stakeholders critically essential.

Alkemio provides online multi-stakeholder community Spaces for collective action, from co-creation to citizen engagement. These are underpinned by a technology infrastructure for secure mutual access to data that remains as open as possible and as closed as necessary; complemented with advisory support and shared learning activities to foster expertise in leading collective action; and supported by a programme of advocacy and outreach that works in common cause with allies towards a future in which technology truly empowers rather than threatens human wellbeing, economic progress and democratic development.

Alkemio's profoundly pro-human digital Spaces create trust by enabling all stakeholders to contribute openly to tackling shared problems. They provide environments in which collaboration can escalate upwards around common priorities, overcoming gaps, sharing situational awareness and collectively optimising progress for mutual benefit. And they also integrate the safe use of A.I. within controls carefully established by their users in alignment with the purpose that they are pursuing.

These Spaces can be used to identify emerging priority problems across society and the economy and to create dedicated homes for each to be solved as a collective challenge. This will create new norms that can be replicated as increasing numbers of participating organisations and people adopt this new way of working. Ultimately, this will unlock powerful network effects that can meet the scale and diversity of the problems that we face.

Public sectors need greater levels of collective action. Public sector spending as a proportion of GDP cannot rise forever. And yet across mature western democracies and beyond, the costs of the public sector are forecast to increase inexorably. This is made especially likely in the light of ageing populations and associated rises in the costs of pensions, social care and health care as well as the costs of the transition to net zero, adapting to a changing climate and increased demands on defence expenditure. Public sectors therefore need to build new relationships with private sectors and citizens to create more economic value to pay the bills and more social value to limit the bills that need to be paid in the first place by increasing societal health and resilience. Governments are now taking a variety of approaches, from models of the 'strategic state' that focus on working across departments, functions and sectors to achieve shared goals, to models of the 'relational state' that focus on empowering cross-sector place-based relationships to achieve change that works with and through communities, and to more participatory forms of governance that emphasize deliberative democracy, service-user involvement and co-production. These approaches build their priorities out of on the ground realities, integrate a wider range of expert know-how, increase democratic sentiment and can give citizens a greater sense of agency over their own lives and influence over the places in which they live and work. This fosters the social cohesion that comes from giving everyone a chance to contribute and to belong.

Governments also increasingly recognise that the social capital of their populations and the democratic systems they depend on are threatened by the combination of today's technologies and structures of ownership that may now act against the interests of particular nations. They do not wish to give foreign private owners the power over their on-and-off button or the chance to hold a potentially malign sway over the narratives that affect the thoughts and actions of their domestic populations. And they are actively seeking to support initiatives that build digital sovereignty and autonomy.

Private sector leaders also increasingly recognise that there is always more value-creating potential outside a business than inside it. Currently many businesses under-perform in part because they are unable to build sufficiently trusted and diverse stakeholder relationships to adapt to an increasingly disrupted operating environment. This may mean businesses have too little mutual understanding with their shareholders to weather the storms of short-term setbacks. It may mean service-providers having a transactional relationship with clients and suppliers rather than tackling problems together as if they were all part of a bigger team. And it may mean businesses overlooking the potential for new ideas, methods and technologies from outside their prior domain of expertise. Businesses therefore also need to foster greater collective action to avoid missing out and to be fully successful in the long-term. This can be achieved in practical ways, whether it is a logistics business working with packaging suppliers to minimise waste, a defence manufacturer working with civilian entrepreneurs to develop dual-use technologies, or a furniture manufacturer working with its customers to design products better suited to their homes. When leaders recognise and empower the value-creating potential of all their stakeholders, they can become more useful to them and increase the lifetime value of their businesses as a result.

Development pathway

Alkemio has developed a digital architecture that can enable collaboration across organisational boundaries.

This centres on the provision of Spaces that focus the perceptions of users on a shared problem or challenge and provides them with innovation templates, customised work flows and a suite of tools to lower the threshold to effective collaboration in an environment of trust. Alkemio enables partners to set criteria for the controlled use of A.I. for each Space. And the technology is built entirely with open-source code which means anyone can learn from Alkemio and anyone can provide suggested improvements.

The scaling of the platform will be driven by working with partners and clients to adapt Alkemio to their particular contexts and priorities, raising the potential of the whole system with each new initiative.

The platform is already being used in a variety of settings including by a number of multi-agency collaborations backed by the Dutch government that are using the platform to support innovation for societal good while addressing their concerns over existing dependencies on a U.S.-dominated big tech environment.

Through these initiatives, Alkemio is already working with key leaders to:

- Curate best-practice in digital autonomy and collective action

- Identify optimal pathways for prototyping, trialling and implementing solutions in lock step with emerging priorities
- And provide the digital infrastructure through which to scale new ways of working.

Alkemio is now seeking investment in its mission that it will use to fulfil its greatest opportunities to drive systemic change.

Priorities will include:

- **Phase one:** working with early adopters to identify the use cases in which the tension is greatest between current limited outcomes and the greater potential solutions that could be achieved with the use of Alkemio and through which the potential leverage for unlocking systems change is most valuable.
- **Phase two:** Working to support leaders operating in these contexts to popularise the ways of working that Alkemio makes possible with their stakeholders. This will involve working closely with partners to identify how scaled interaction can best be achieved in their contexts. It may include creating bespoke Spaces designed to focus attention on their priorities and co-designing templates and flows that make their processes seamless and replicable, identifying the behavioural insights that unlock the most effective forms of collaboration along the way.
- **Phase three:** Integrating the insights from Phase Two directly into the core platform so that customer support becomes more automated and usage can be scaled.

As these phases unfold, Alkemio will develop an outreach agenda in tandem with early champions to convene and engage leaders in the mission of co-operating across organisational boundaries for the greater good. This will include a focus on achieving mission-led government aspirations, strengthening a relational approach to public services, unlocking greater collaboration across the public and private sectors, supporting active citizenship and participatory democracy and achieving the transition to stakeholder capitalism.

Alkemio will also continue to develop the underpinning digital infrastructure that will enable the public sector to achieve digital sovereignty and support digital autonomy, powering the next generation of change in alignment with European values and public interest.

The bridge to change

We are living through a time of extraordinary change. Throughout most of human history, there would have been nothing we could do to destroy our shared home. Since the invention of nuclear weapons there has been something we could do to wreck major portions of the world if we made a serious mistake. With the climate emergency, we are now in a position in which unless we actively change how we live and work we shall make increasingly vast areas of the globe uninhabitable. And with the development of A.I. and the interaction of misinformation, global financial markets, criminality and conflict, the ‘digital emergency’ could now overtake the climate emergency in the threat that it poses, making our response on climate so far look like a slow, failed dress rehearsal for much faster-moving threats coming our way. Democracy, prosperity, and the ability to cope with our complex challenges are now recognised to depend on urgent collective responses which can best be underpinned by a digital autonomy and sovereignty which can preserve, support and spread the values we hold dear.

As our technology environment rapidly shifts and interacts with the forces shaping our economies and societies, the threats to human wellbeing and even existence may never have been greater, but nor have the potential opportunities for progress.

Alkemio is therefore working towards a world in which technology brings people together across boundaries to create change that benefits everyone. Technology will be applied in the service of greater human flourishing, preserving digital autonomy and enabling the creation of greater individual benefits in a way that also contributes to the building of societal resilience.

The time has come to create shared Spaces in which our most important problems can be addressed to the best of our collective abilities.

We must build a bridge to that future while the chance remains.

[Outro]

You have been listening to an Alkemio production of 'An Invitation to Bridge the Spaces Between Us', written and narrated by Paul Skinner.

The producer and editor was Peter Gallacher.

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Paul is also the author of:

The Purpose Upgrade: Change your business to save the world. Change the world to save your business, published by Little Brown, an imprint of Hachette, and by Hachette Audio, in 2022.

And

Collaborative Advantage: How collaboration beats competition as a strategy for success, also published by Little Brown, in 2018.