

WORLDVIEW

The Sustainability Issue



- organic-ish agriculture
- food, body, soul
- forests-in-the-city
- solar justice
- by land and sea

May 2018

https://janginsburg.com/uploads/2/1/8/1/21819274/podzine_backgrounder.pdf

WBEZ
CHICAGO
podzine

PODZINE PROPOSAL

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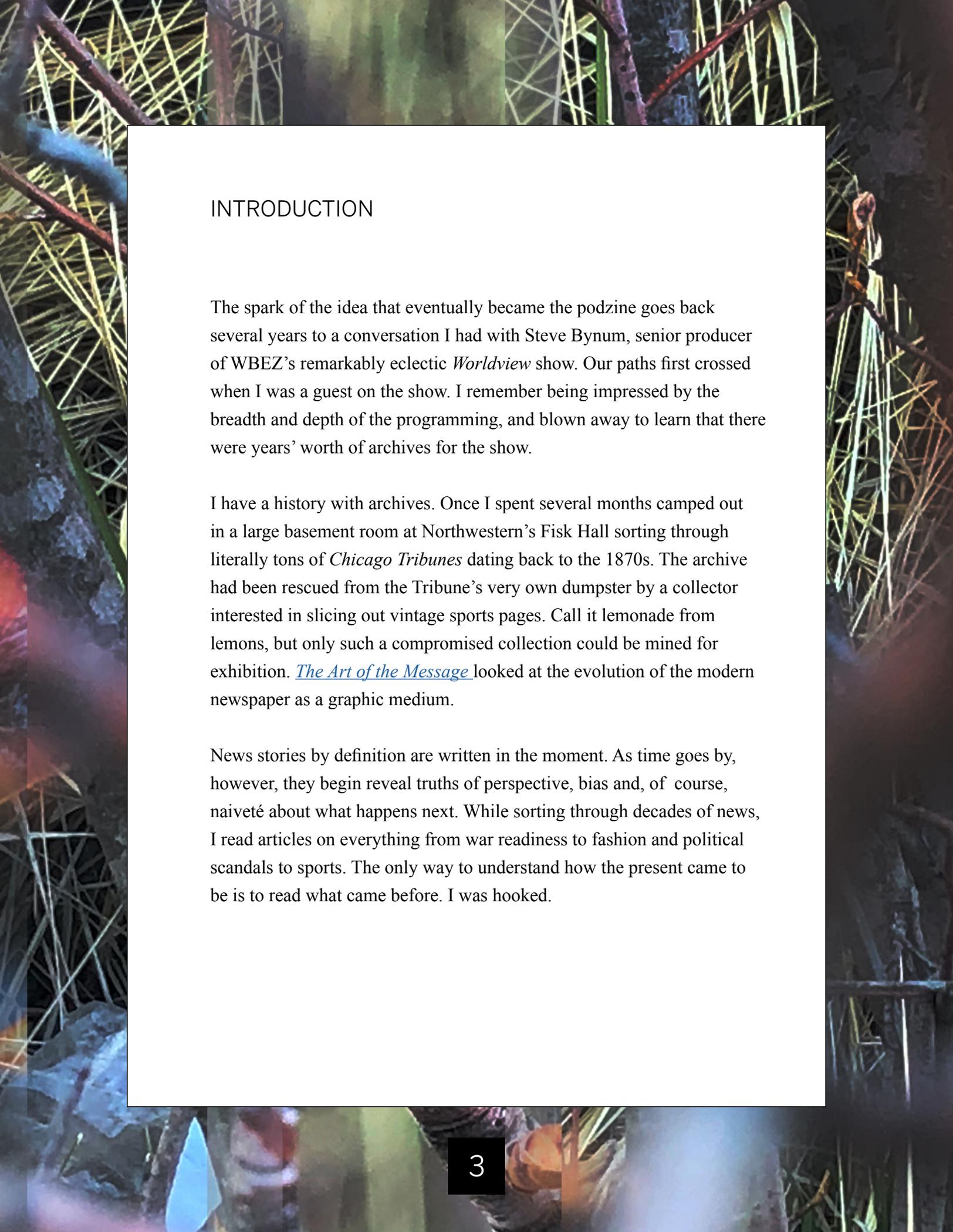
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** The cover is a mock-up. This is not a sample podzine.*

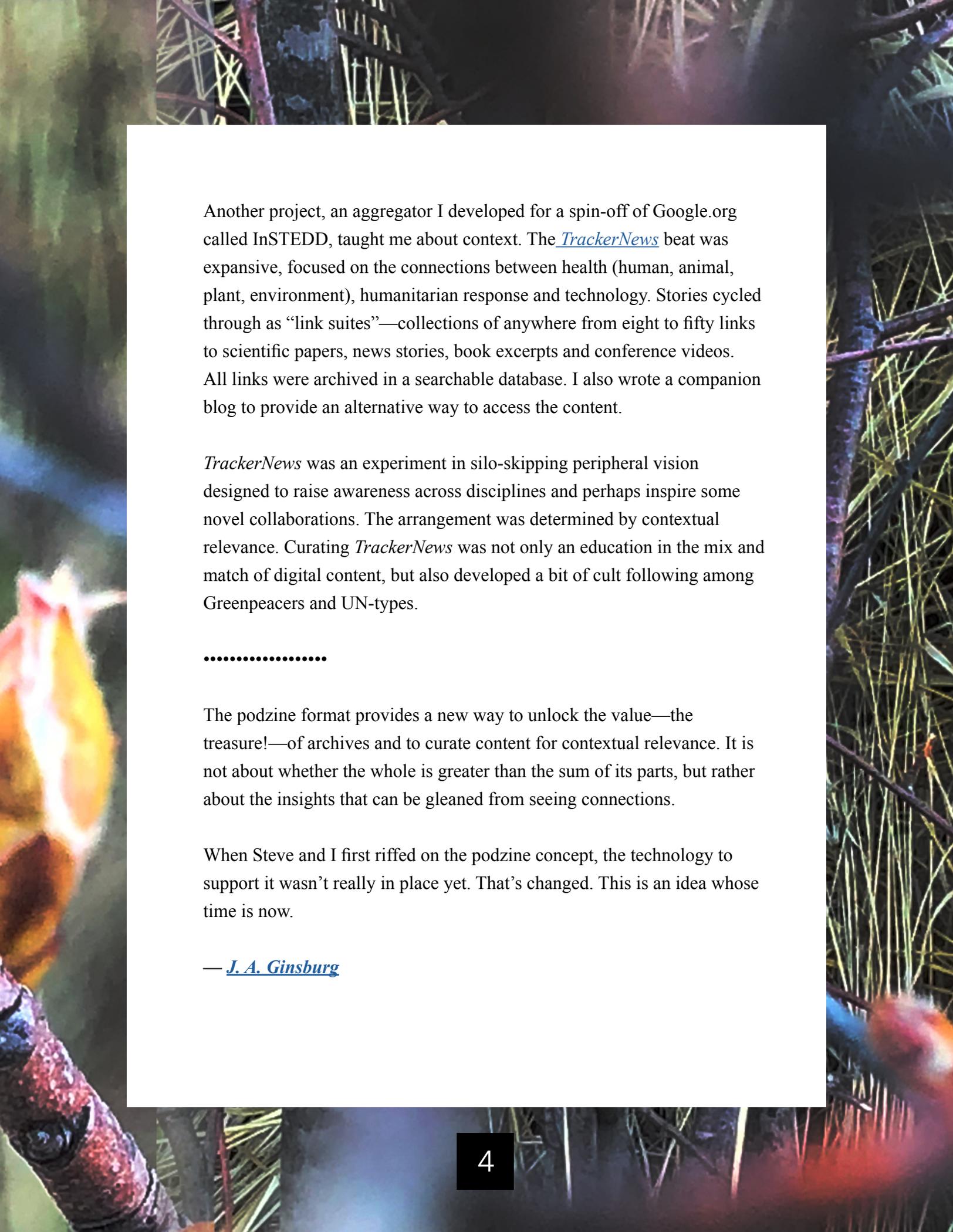


INTRODUCTION

The spark of the idea that eventually became the podzine goes back several years to a conversation I had with Steve Bynum, senior producer of WBEZ's remarkably eclectic *Worldview* show. Our paths first crossed when I was a guest on the show. I remember being impressed by the breadth and depth of the programming, and blown away to learn that there were years' worth of archives for the show.

I have a history with archives. Once I spent several months camped out in a large basement room at Northwestern's Fisk Hall sorting through literally tons of *Chicago Tribunes* dating back to the 1870s. The archive had been rescued from the Tribune's very own dumpster by a collector interested in slicing out vintage sports pages. Call it lemonade from lemons, but only such a compromised collection could be mined for exhibition. [*The Art of the Message*](#) looked at the evolution of the modern newspaper as a graphic medium.

News stories by definition are written in the moment. As time goes by, however, they begin reveal truths of perspective, bias and, of course, naiveté about what happens next. While sorting through decades of news, I read articles on everything from war readiness to fashion and political scandals to sports. The only way to understand how the present came to be is to read what came before. I was hooked.



Another project, an aggregator I developed for a spin-off of Google.org called InSTEDD, taught me about context. The [*TrackerNews*](#) beat was expansive, focused on the connections between health (human, animal, plant, environment), humanitarian response and technology. Stories cycled through as “link suites”—collections of anywhere from eight to fifty links to scientific papers, news stories, book excerpts and conference videos. All links were archived in a searchable database. I also wrote a companion blog to provide an alternative way to access the content.

TrackerNews was an experiment in silo-skipping peripheral vision designed to raise awareness across disciplines and perhaps inspire some novel collaborations. The arrangement was determined by contextual relevance. Curating *TrackerNews* was not only an education in the mix and match of digital content, but also developed a bit of cult following among Greenpeacers and UN-types.

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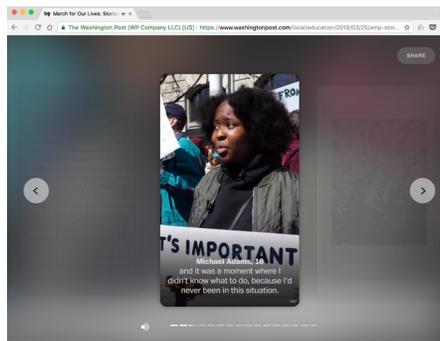
The podzine format provides a new way to unlock the value—the treasure!—of archives and to curate content for contextual relevance. It is not about whether the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, but rather about the insights that can be gleaned from seeing connections.

When Steve and I first riffed on the podzine concept, the technology to support it wasn't really in place yet. That's changed. This is an idea whose time is now.

— [*J. A. Ginsburg*](#)

BACKGROUND

A podzine is exactly what you think it is: a magazine built around podcasts. The idea seems as obvious a “news paper,” especially in our mashed up media landscape where the lines between channels have been all but digitally obliterated. In short order we have come to expect embedded videos and articles laced with hyperlinks. That was just the beginning.



New and often surprising media combinations blip into existence with unnerving regularity. As soon as a technology is viable, its limits are stretched. For example, as part of its coverage of the #MarchForOurLives anti-gun rally in Washington DC, the [Washington Post created an Instagram album](#) of smart phone photos and video interviews: the new cinéma vérité.

Innovation hasn't been limited to production. Streaming has completely changed the distribution game, while smartphones and tablets synced to wireless headphones and speakers have profoundly changed the experience. Listeners / viewers / readers are now in charge of the schedule. They can listen, view and read—often in combination—whenever and wherever they want, and also as many times they wish. With a few clicks content can be redistributed and shared.

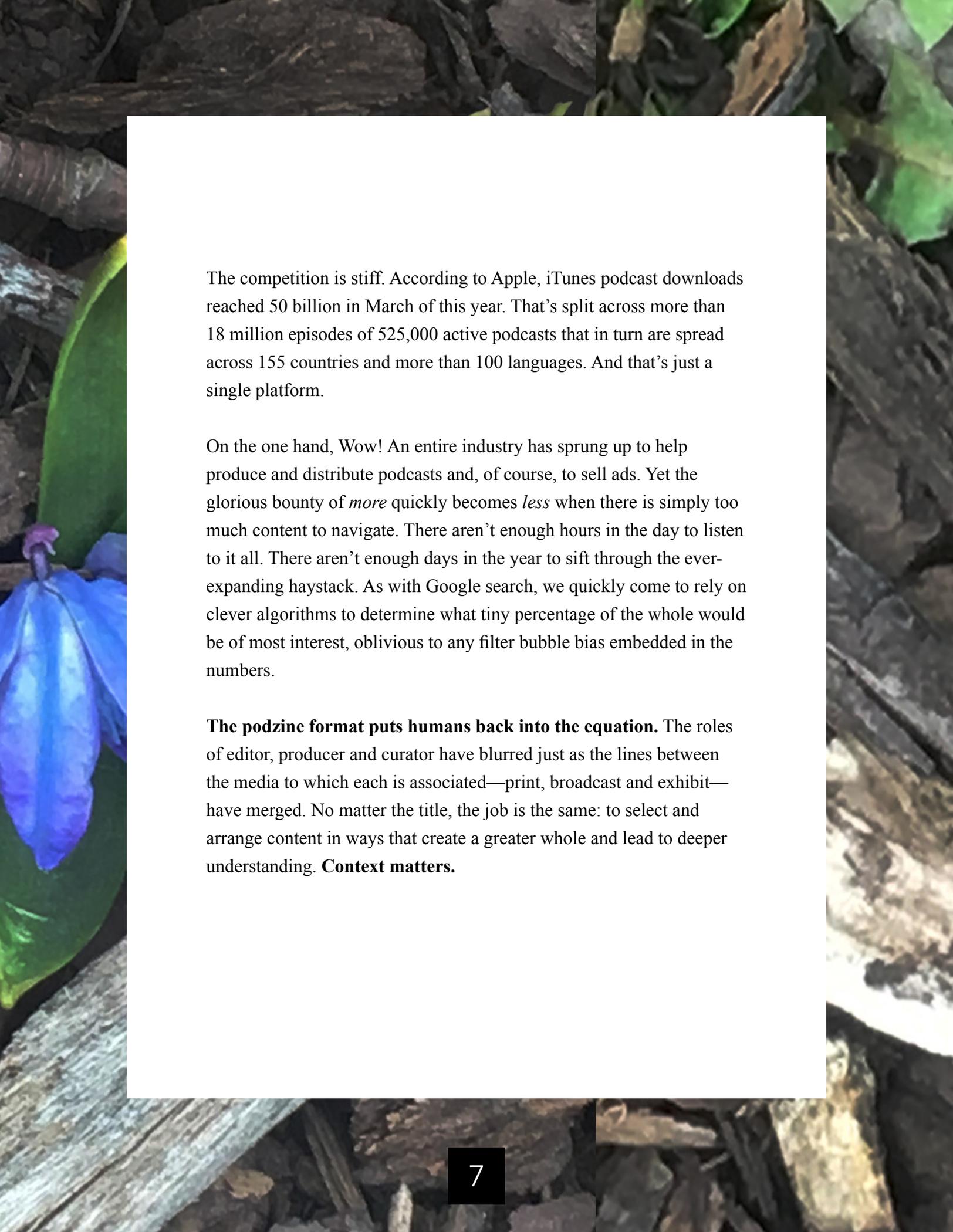
Not since the turn of the last century has there been this much creative spark in the world of media.



Several years ago I curated an exhibit on the evolution of the modern newspaper as a graphic medium. *The Art of the Message* was based on a rare, private, rag-edition run of *Chicago Tribunes* from the 1870s through WWII. It was a remarkable time for innovation in everything from paper-making and printing to marketing. The Tribune, which also owned radio station WGN (“World’s Greatest Newspaper”) also published sheet music in the paper, including that toe-tapping show-stopper, *You Have Lots of Time to Read on Sunday!* Sing along with the radio! Play it on the piano at home!

CONTEXT

Over the last couple of years, podcasts have come into their own. They have become as ubiquitous and de rigueur as blogs: every media outlet, every company and almost everybody seems to have one. “Subscribe on iTunes!” has joined “Follow on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram!” in the pantheon of cheerfully annoying digital-age requests.



The competition is stiff. According to Apple, iTunes podcast downloads reached 50 billion in March of this year. That's split across more than 18 million episodes of 525,000 active podcasts that in turn are spread across 155 countries and more than 100 languages. And that's just a single platform.

On the one hand, Wow! An entire industry has sprung up to help produce and distribute podcasts and, of course, to sell ads. Yet the glorious bounty of *more* quickly becomes *less* when there is simply too much content to navigate. There aren't enough hours in the day to listen to it all. There aren't enough days in the year to sift through the ever-expanding haystack. As with Google search, we quickly come to rely on clever algorithms to determine what tiny percentage of the whole would be of most interest, oblivious to any filter bubble bias embedded in the numbers.

The podzine format puts humans back into the equation. The roles of editor, producer and curator have blurred just as the lines between the media to which each is associated—print, broadcast and exhibit—have merged. No matter the title, the job is the same: to select and arrange content in ways that create a greater whole and lead to deeper understanding. **Context matters.**

MISSION

“Chicago Public Media serves the public interest by creating and delivering diverse, compelling content that informs, inspires, enriches and entertains. Through a broad range of media platforms, we connect diverse audiences in our service area and beyond to one another.”

The line between broadcast and podcast has also blurred. A few years ago it was an easy distinction. Broadcast was content delivered over the airwaves. Podcasts were recorded to be downloaded or streamed. Now every archived broadcast becomes a podcast, while podcasts are often broadcast. Adding to the dizzying mix, print news organizations have recording studios churning out NPR-level content. [In fact some are broadcast on NPR](#) .

Identifying an audience—a “service area”— is also in the midst of change. What was once determined by the strength of a station’s radio transmitter or the size of its network, with marketing surveys to fine tune, has been completely up-ended by the web. Anyone anywhere can redistribute content at any moment using social media, text and email. In a very real sense, time and space have collapsed.

Into this free-for-all media mash-up, the **podzine format provides a structure to frame and combine content in new, meaningful ways for audiences defined by interests rather than geography**. It provides a filter but not a filter bubble. Everyone sees the same content. In way that seems almost retro, it allows everyone to be on same page.

Also, while print media use podcasts as sidebars, the podzine reverses the equation. Audio content is the driver. Articles, links, photos, graphics and videos augment the podcasts, **and in combination become a resource.**

The value of access to archives, including interviews with real-time insights, for the public interest cannot be underestimated. We live in an era riddled with and sometimes shaped by fake news, alternative facts and manipulated information (e.g., [the methodical deletion of references to climate change in government reports](#)). The best and perhaps only way to understand the factors that have shaped the present and inform the future is to tap into the past. To slightly paraphrase the marvelous [title of a book](#) about newspapers during the American Revolution: Before it is history, it is news.

WBEZ | WORLDVIEW

The podzine format is flexible, adaptable, modular, cheap to distribute and easy to produce, requiring only comparatively minor modifications to existing software. It is a clear value-add for anyone and any organization—media companies, corporations, nonprofits, schools—producing podcasts.

Although the concept is not difficult, it is important to set the bar high with well-produced examples.

There are several reasons why I think WBEZ would be a good place to launch podzines:

- **Philosophy:** Public media is a critical pillar for the fourth estate. Its mandate is to serve the public, not private interests. The driver is not the fiction of “fair and balanced,” but rather facts, truth and curiosity.
- **Archives:** What have been largely stranded assets are the raw material for creating rich, new, relevant content.
- **Location:** WBEZ is my hometown NPR affiliate.
- **Business:** The acquisition of podcasting platform Pocket Casts, in partnership with NPR, WNYC Studio and *This American Life*, signals a commitment to podcasting and also provides a ready-made network for the distribution of podzines and best-in-class podzine software tools.
- **Newsroom:** There is bench! To make really interesting podzines requires the talents of journalists with expertise across a range of beats.

Likewise, there are a number of reasons why I think *Worldview* would make an excellent pioneer podzine.

- **Depth and Breadth | Series Potential:** The range of topics covered regularly and in depth on *Worldview* over many years has been truly remarkable: Water, China, Climate Change, Culinary Culture, World Music, Immigration, Energy, Global Health, Agriculture—the list goes on and on. Each topic could be a podzine or even multiple podzines. There is more than enough material to create a branded podzine series.
- **Archives:** The *Worldview* archive is jackpot gold: interviews with people at the frontlines of everything imaginable, discussing issues and ideas in depth, providing in-the-moment points of view.
- **Local to Global:** *Worldview* is uniquely positioned to explore a single topic from a variety of perspectives: local, regional, national, global. This speaks to CPM’s mission of reaching a “service area” whose boundaries now include all of the above.
- **Partners:** *Worldview*’s network of Chicago-based partners is a unique asset (universities, museums, botanic gardens, community organizations, think tanks, etc.). Not only can these partners provide content, but they also provide a series of networked distribution nodes for each podzine.
- **Education:** *Worldview* is Social Studies writ large. The inclusion of a short guide for middle and high school teachers would transform each issue into a valuable supplementary text—an innovative extension of CPM’s mission.

COSTS | FORMATS | SPONSORS | MARKETING

Podzines based on WBEZ programming unlock value from otherwise stranded or under-utilized assets. Broadcast / podcast production costs have already been covered and newsroom capabilities can be leveraged. There are still costs such as research, additional content, design, web-hosting, etc.

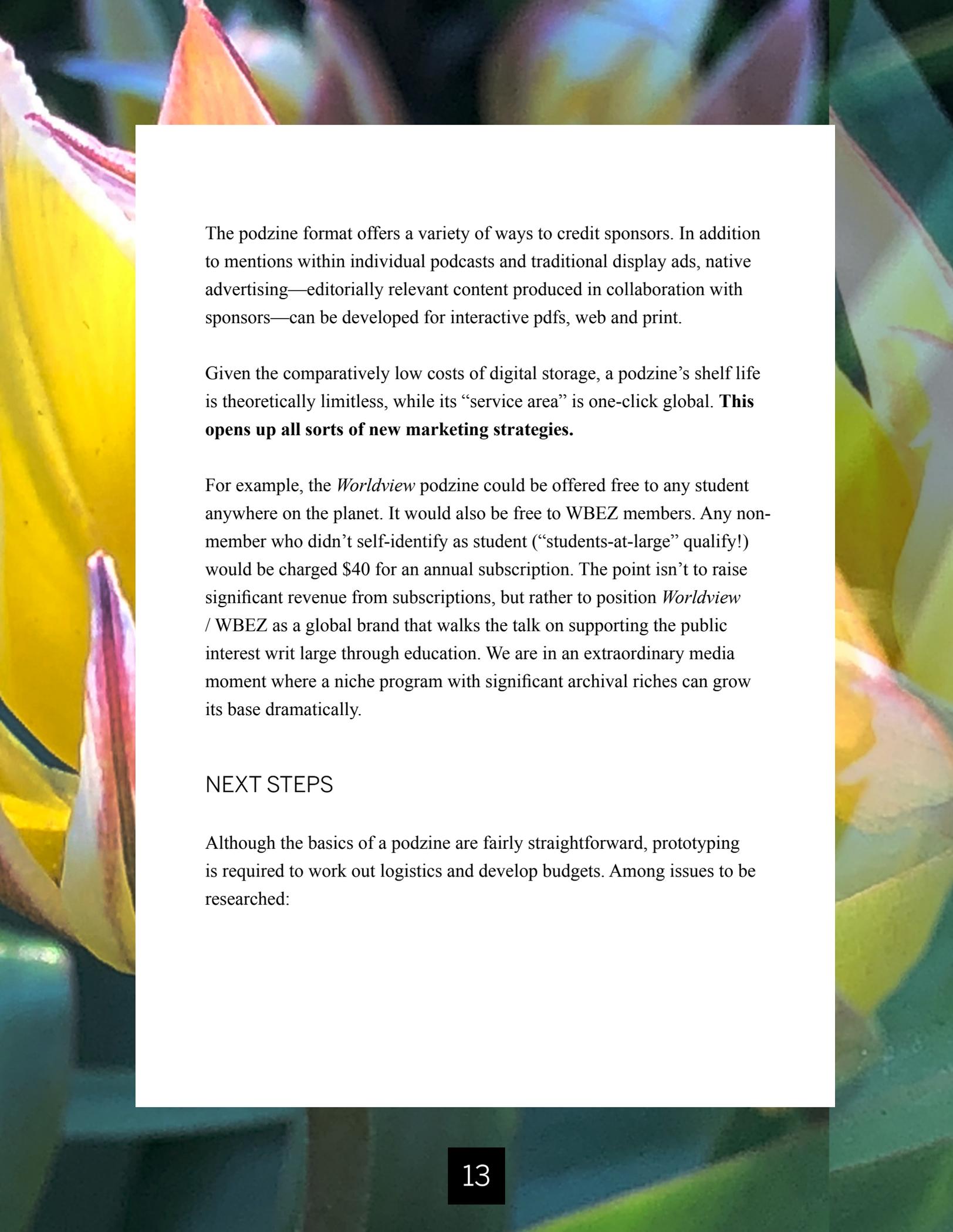
Podzines can take on several forms and, in fact, a single podzine may be adapted for all of them. The modularity of assets provide flexibility. The point is presenting information to listeners / readers in ways that are most useful to them and also best serve the content.

- Interactive pdf
- Website
- Print (with QR codes)

Interactive pdfs and print magazines are better for contextual layouts. Print is also better suited to the kismet of flip-through discovery.

Since the core content is digital, a robust website is essential, though the exact form that takes requires exploration. Responsive website design—where layouts are determined by how individual assets literally stack up on an small screen—is always a compromise.

Modularity also means that each digital asset has its own url, which means it can be *disaggregated* from the whole and shared. Each asset, in turn, can be leveraged to promote the branded podzine via an embedded link added to its code. **Marketing can be baked in.**



The podzine format offers a variety of ways to credit sponsors. In addition to mentions within individual podcasts and traditional display ads, native advertising—editorially relevant content produced in collaboration with sponsors—can be developed for interactive pdfs, web and print.

Given the comparatively low costs of digital storage, a podzine’s shelf life is theoretically limitless, while its “service area” is one-click global. **This opens up all sorts of new marketing strategies.**

For example, the *Worldview* podzine could be offered free to any student anywhere on the planet. It would also be free to WBEZ members. Any non-member who didn’t self-identify as student (“students-at-large” qualify!) would be charged \$40 for an annual subscription. The point isn’t to raise significant revenue from subscriptions, but rather to position *Worldview* / WBEZ as a global brand that walks the talk on supporting the public interest writ large through education. We are in an extraordinary media moment where a niche program with significant archival riches can grow its base dramatically.

NEXT STEPS

Although the basics of a podzine are fairly straightforward, prototyping is required to work out logistics and develop budgets. Among issues to be researched:

- **Digital archives:** Determine how easy, or not, *Worldview* | WBEZ files are to access. What, if anything, can be improved?
- **Formats:** Determine what can be modified from off-the-shelf software and what needs to be developed from scratch. Also, develop a list of essential, best-in-class features for usability (e.g., a play-bar bookmarking).
- **Design:** Clarify objectives. When asked to re-imagine Spotify a couple of years ago, [designer Brian Collins set out to change a site that “looked like engineering” to one that “looked like music.”](#) The podzine, a synthesis, is brand new medium. Its look and feel should also be a synthesis, drawing on the past but re-imagined in ways that inspire innovation.
- **Editorial:** Develop content lists for three or four sample podzines. This includes existing podcasts, re-edits and the production of podzine-specific segments, along with articles, linked bibliographies, graphics and videos. Also, identify partner organizations for content collaboration (e.g., CCGA, the Field Museum, universities, etc.).
- **Sponsors:** Identify potential sponsors.

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