

**A New Angle**  
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**Justin Angle:** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey folks, welcome back. And thanks for tuning in today's our May edition of incentives and instincts, a recurring series in which I speak with economist and friend Bryce Ward, about some of the broader issues facing our society. Bryce, how are you today?

**Bryce Ward:** It's good. It's spring, finally.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, it is. It does feel like spring. So it's, it's good to see you here in the studio. And, today we're gonna try to tackle social media. What is it doing to us and can we and our democracy survive it?

**Justin Angle:** So I know you and I are both fans of NYU psychologists, Jonathan Haidt's work. He was sounding the alarm early on social media and the connection between it and teen depression, suicide, Anxiety. You know, this was seven, eight years ago. Many folks were dismissing those claims as sort of ahead of the evidence. Well, now he's he and his colleagues have accumulated quite a bit of evidence that's connecting particularly Instagram with depression, anxiety, and suicide ideation and suicide action

among teenage girls in particular. And how do you feel about the Haidt work in general? And this, this body of work, trying to link social media to some bad outcomes with mental health?

**Bryce Ward:** Look, it's, it's a hard thing to ultimately establish causality for. We know the trends. So the description is terrifying, right? Which is that's basically starting in 2009, teenage mental health statistics, basically in any one you want to pick, suddenly started spiking up, particularly for girls, right. Uh, and they are up massively. Now the suicide stuff, it's just reversing a downward trend, right? So we're basically back where we were when we were in high school. Right. But like it had—

**Justin Angle:** Things were getting better for a period of time.

**Bryce Ward:** But for 20 years there had been, they had been collapsing. And so suddenly 2009, roughly everything starts reversing and, you know, depression, suicide ideation, suicide attempts are all up enormously. terrifyingly. Yeah. I think is the way to think about it. And you know, I mean, we're at now, I think it's like 40% of, of adolescent girls are reporting persistent feelings of anxiety and depression.

**Justin Angle:** And we're seeing similar trends on campuses across different student cohorts. You know, some people will say, well, Hey, this is just a question of measurement. If you're asking people over and over again, are you feeling depressed? Are you feeling anxious? You're gonna get more 'yes's to that question, but we're also seeing this in hard measures, people taking their own lives.

**Bryce Ward:** And that's the, you know, I mean, so the other, the other thing that people push back on was, oh, it's just now we're more comfortable talking about it.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah.

**Bryce Ward:** Right. Which is always a bit bogus. I mean, maybe not the depression one, cause we didn't ask those questions, but certainly like, you know, have you ever thought about suicide? It was a question that I took, I took the youth high school, whatever the CDC survey is. I remember taking it when I was a sophomore. You know, that data goes back to the early nineties when I was in school. And you know, we, we were asking these questions then and people were saying, yes, I have thought about suicide and I have made a plan to commit suicide. So that part, you know, I mean, that decline was real. And so I, I never really bought into these just were more comfortable. There may be a little bit of that, but yeah. I mean the actual like emergency room statistics are what what's spiking along with all of this. Right. So with the fact that we're seeing more adolescents in emergency rooms, uh, having, you know, with some sort of self harm, yeah. This is real, like, whatever you wanna talk about, this is a real problem. These are real trends that we need to start a) understand and then say, okay, well, what are we gonna try and do to reverse this?

**Justin Angle:** Right. And so you can also ask the question, like, is this pandemic related? Is it sort of exacerbated in the last two years? We've certainly seen some exacerbation, but these trends started long before pandemic. So you can kind of dismiss the pandemic as, as a, as a single cause it may be as a catalyst of a sort.

**Bryce Ward:** Or yeah. Or it may have exacerbated. Right. You know, or accelerant accelerated, whatever was going on. But the reality is is that these trends were going on long before our, our little friend, the coronavirus started spreading around our little friend.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. So what, what, what do we know about mechanism? You know, cuz that's an that's one thing that I think was a common critique of this, this body of research, he was saying, you know, correlation is not causation or how are we trying to establish causation?

**Bryce Ward:** Well obviously when the way, the way we really wanna establish causation is through experiment. Right? And we actually now have a couple of experiments, a friend of mine from graduate school, a guy named Matthew Jenks who's at Stanford. He has two papers now where we have experimental evidence, not necessarily focused on teen girls, but the first was him and a group of colleagues in 2018, uh, in the weeks before the 2018 election, they paid people to deactivate their Facebook accounts randomly. Okay. Right. And what did we learn? Well, we learned that. So, you know, your subjective wellbeing report went up, your, uh, polarization went down, your knowledge of the news, went down mm-hmm <affirmative> and there were some other evidence that basically that people were addicted to this. And then, then a Newark paper, uh, with a guy named hunt Alcot on digital, which was about Facebook that they paid.

**Bryce Ward:** They put an app on people's phones that put a hard limit on how much time you could spend on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, your browser. And then basically said, look, we'll pay you for every minute that you reduce.

**Justin Angle:** Right.

**Bryce Ward:** Right. And again, they found that when you paid people, people spend a lot less time <laugh> and then when you took the money away, they kept spending less time. And you know, they, they followed up for six weeks followed after the, the initial experimental period and people continued to reduce it. And then, you know, that combined with some other evidence, basically what they figured out was about a third of the time that people spent on their phones in those kinds of apps is due to self control problems. Right. They don't want to do it, but they're addicted to it or, you know, whatever the paper's called digital addiction, people can go check it out. But so, yeah. So I mean, we know that it's addictive. We know that, uh, it was designed to be addictive.

**Justin Angle:** And that addiction piece though, let's pause on that for a moment. Cuz that's kind of a controversial term in many ways. I mean there is a, a neuropsychologist at Columbia, Dr. Carl Hart who does work on, on actual drugs where he pays crack addicts or cocaine addicts to stop using cocaine. And he says, because I can find the inflection point where they say, you know, I'd rather have the dollar or however many dollars versus another dose as evidence that the addiction is not this chemical mechanism that we necessarily think it is. So yeah. How we sort of frame addiction in this conversation is probably gonna be a little bit loose in, in those terms?

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. So yeah. So I think the, yeah, we'll just use the language they use, which is self control problems. Right? Mm-hmm <affirmative>, it's something it's not, it's not that I'm like, this is clearly the best use of these minutes. It's I'm here because something has put me here and when I'm given the opportunity to try and restrict it, I do.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. So there's this self control problem. We are inclined to use more of this thing and we'll get into the why of that in a moment. But let's talk about the, why does it hurt us?

**Bryce Ward:** So I think there's a couple of different hypotheses so the first hypothesis is particularly the posting of pictures of yourself. Uh, you know, but even I actually think, you know, I mean, whether it's pictures or not a post is putting yourself out there it is. And um, if you don't get the, what you expect in terms of engagement, it feels bad. Right. And you start tracking how many, you know, how much, you know, how many people are looking at this. Cuz there are all these ways that you can look at the statistics on all your various posts and you know, and then you start spending a whole bunch of time, not just thinking about the response to the post, but planning the post and you know, so you're just consuming a lot of your attention yes. In this area, which—

**Justin Angle:** You're investing yourself

**Bryce Ward:** You're investing yourself in something and is very easy not to get the feedback that you want out of it. Right. So I think that's the, you know, we'll call that the direction.

**Justin Angle:** Well, the feedback you want is a hundred percent affirmation. Yeah. Like you're the greatest, you're beautiful. All this positive affirmation. There's no such thing as enough likes that's right, right. There's no such thing as enough positive, positive content enough

**Bryce Ward:** Followers, enough, uh, friends, whatever it is. Absolutely just you're just kind of, Ooh, let me get some more, let me get some more. Let me look at it some more and another direct effect of social media, which again, I don't know about evidence for than I've got plenty of anecdotal evidence from people who that they, they don't like the social comparison. Yeah. We're not good at actually evaluating our own lives, but like have some notion of my average. And what people put on social media is their best.

**Justin Angle:** And we think of it as their life.

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. Yeah. And it, I have this, at least for some people that have told me that this is why they quit was they couldn't, even though they knew it. Yeah. They couldn't keep feel from feeling less than because of how great everybody else looked.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And so height makes the claim and others do too, that this is particularly pernicious with young girls who are sort of entering puberty and going

through this psychological and physical change. And to be putting images of themselves out in public that get rated and reviewed and commented back on, as we just discussed is particularly dangerous to this group.

**Bryce Ward:** And no, I mean, just think about our own pre-internet high school experience. Oh yeah. Right. You know, like, oh man, they had the nicer car or they had, you know, they just, you know, they had nicer clothes or whatever. Now I can see every, I can see everything that you wanna put, like the party that you went to. All of it. I didn't, I might have known that there was a party, but I didn't look at any pictures of it.

**Justin Angle:** I didn't feel like I missed out right. After seeing all these photos.

**Bryce Ward:** I didn't, you know, I just knew there was a party at so-and-so's house and I didn't go. Yeah. Like whatever, like, it didn't bother me. Cause I wasn't like, oh wait So and so was there. Yeah. Or this person was there or, you know, I didn't know where people went on vacation unless you were my close friend. Like, you know, so this is just all that kind of stuff. These, these kind of the emotions that are tied to we're social creatures, we want to compare ourselves. Yes. And you know, this is just social comparison on steroids. And now somebody from your high school, isn't just gonna be the cool kid in high school. They could be the cool kid in the world. Right. They're an influencer. And they're like getting all this stuff and like, yeah. That's real power in a world where the currency is status.

**Justin Angle:** That's a job description that, you know, younger people want these days, they say, I wanna become a social media influencer.

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. You know?

**Justin Angle:** I mean, it can't be a path to making millions of dollars.

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. I mean, there were kids that could be actors or whatever it was when we were kids. But like where I was from, I don't recall. I don't think anybody was quote famous.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. And in some ways this is a good thing. Like it's democratizing in a way, like if you don't have the, the resources to like hire fancy acting coach and get yourself to New York or LA, like —

**Bryce Ward:** We can view that as benefit, but it's coming at a big cost.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. Right. Exactly.

**Bryce Ward:** And that's, that's where we have to struggle. Right. Is it worth it for some small number of people to able to become rich? Is that worth the big spike in depression and anxiety suicide? It seems like there's an obvious answer, which is that the cost to adolescence is probably not worth the fact that you can become famous. Right. You know, and it's also worth, you know, moving from the, the direct effects of social media bucket to there's also, you know, the other part of this is the indirect effects, right. Which is what is this crowd out all these hours that I'm spending on this thing is coming at a cost.

**Justin Angle:** And let's just sort of quote some of these hours, like Facebook, weekly average use is about 16 hours, Instagram, eight hours talk 26 hours is average weekly use for the Toker. Say, people are allocating huge portions of their life to this. And, and as you said, yeah. What sort of things is this crowding out?

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. And, and that's the part that they're on it, right. Again, this does not account for the time that you're spent thinking about what you're going to put on it all the, or you know, or the feelings that come after you have gotten off of it. There's lots of other stuff that you should be doing as a teenager,

**Justin Angle:** Get outside,

**Bryce Ward:** Go interact with humans,

**Justin Angle:** Read a book,

**Bryce Ward:** All those things. Like we know that friends is literally one of the most important things that you can have in your life. Yeah. Right.

**Justin Angle:** That is clear.

**Bryce Ward:** Health, wealth, you know, happiness. If you're saying, what is it that generates some of the biggest effects? I mean, I was reading a book recently by this

guy named Robin Dunbar, but you know, in the preamble space, well, why do we care about this? He cite this study, which basically is like having a good social framework, in terms of its effect on your health, is equivalent to quitting smoking.

**Justin Angle:** Wow.

**Bryce Ward:** Right. Wow. I mean, friends are huge. Yeah. Right. You know, you know, my own research on this is, you know, we're looking at time use data, which where we say people, okay, well, what were you doing? And how did it make you feel? Right. And you say, well, what are the, what is the thing that causes the biggest increase in how much you say you feel good? It's socializing. It's time with friends and family. And

**Justin Angle:** I think as we're emerging from pandemic and hopefully that continues, we're all sort of living through that reality of being in person, in our interactions, being able to socialize or converse or teach a class without a mask on and with the other person without having a mask on when that's safe. I mean, it is, it has been liberating in so many ways. And I can feel the sort of scaffolding of mental health kind of coming back into play in my own mind. And across society, we have to be experiencing that as well.

**Bryce Ward:** Well, hopefully, and hopefully we start doing more of it. But again, the problem with social media is it makes me feel some like simulation of social connection.

**Justin Angle:** Right.

**Bryce Ward:** At a ridiculously low cost. Because normally they interact with people at work. Right. It's it takes work. Right. I gotta get dressed. I gotta leave my house. Yeah. Like, you know, I gotta like clean up, like I gotta be presentable. Right.

**Bryce Ward:** Gotta drive somewhere or walk somewhere or travel somewhere. It's

**Justin Angle:** Really hard.

**Bryce Ward:** You Know?

**Justin Angle:** And that's a very kind of, I mean, to draw from stoicism a little bit, it'd be an interesting, I think a useful framework for thinking about social media for the listener and for us is like, what is it stealing? Like you're paying for this with your life. You're allocating time that you can't get back to this thing. What is that crowding out?

**Bryce Ward:** It's crowding your attention. Right. In fact, that's what the, the digital addiction paper, like, you know, then when they were looked at social subjective wellbeing kind of stuff, the thing that moved the most was a measure of kind of attention. Right. That's what you were giving up. That's what you get back when you don't put your time into social media is you get attention to other stuff. And yeah, those are scarce effort. Motivation attention are scarce commodities in your life. Right. And you know, you should be thinking about how you want to allocate them just as you would your bank account. So Derek Thompson refers to social media as attention alcohol. Yeah. And, you know, I think it's a really nice metaphor for what it is, you know,

it's fine for a lot of people. It's totally okay to do it in some form of moderation, but like for some people it really does hijack your attention. And unlike alcohol it's new, we've had alcohol forever.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. It's not regulated.

**Bryce Ward:** We don't have language around it.

**Justin Angle:** There's a norm that you can do it everywhere all the time. Pretty much like in the aisle, at the grocery store.

**Bryce Ward:** We haven't built the infrastructure to say, okay, these are, we understand the trade offs and we're gonna regulate this in this way and we're gonna have these norms and, you know, and that's where, it's why it's particularly dangerous for younger people. But I think another part of why we're seeing this trend in adolescent, uh, mental health outcome is because of how we're parenting our kids, right? The accommodative helicopter, bulldozer, snowplow, whatever we wanna call it, parenting it's fundamentally about, I don't want my child to ever feel bad.

**Bryce Ward:** And I think what we are learning increasingly with things like cognitive behavioral therapy or exposure therapy or whatever it is is that those work really well. Right. I mean the evidence base just keeps growing. Right. And so a part of what we think of as childhood historically was it was just this, you know, well developed form of when you get this much stress at this age and get this stress and you just kind of have to kind of, you start learning and look, it's not perfect. Right. You know, I mean, you

know, the, the modern equivalent to this is we talk about allergies. Right. And, you know, peanut allergies and particularly we have a lot of evidence for, which is part of the problem we have with peanut allergies is because we started treating peanut allergies.

**Justin Angle:** Right? Yes. Take away the peanuts, take away—

**Bryce Ward:** The peanut peanut. And, and then, you know, we learned that, oh, actually, if you just keep exposing kids, then they'll typically most, for the most part they'll get better. Right. But there's some that don't, and you know, our children are kind of the same way. Right. They need to be doing developmentally appropriate risk taking so that they're able to handle certain stressors.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. I mean, that's what life's about stress and adaptation. And in many ways, you know, this, this framework that, um, a neurobiologists Anke is put out in her recent book, what's it called? Dopamine Nation?

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. Dopamine Nation.

**Justin Angle:** Explain that framework cuz it sort of provides an elegant way for understanding what's going on in our brains with regard to pleasure and pain.

**Bryce Ward:** So, you know, basically she's used dopamine as this key chemical. Right. The key motivator. Yeah. Right. And it evolved over the course of millennia and humans, uh, as a way to get us to, you know, oh, we did something. We felt good,

whatever we ate some fruit. Right. Yeah. That was really good. I should keep walking now and go find some more.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. Cuz you have to put the effort in to go finding the more fruit. Right.

**Bryce Ward:** So dopamine is this wonderful motivation system in a world of scarcity.

**Justin Angle:** That we had millions of years to adapt, to develop and adapt to.

**Bryce Ward:** Yeah. And we lived in scarcity. Exactly. Real scarcity. Right. And so, you know, and we live in real scarcity until relatively recently. Right. And it's not to say that I'm an economist, there's still plenty of scarcity, right? Yeah. I study scarcity. That's what I do. But like we have relative abundance, the dopamine in our brains, you know, that response, the way that she describes it, she describes it as like this Teeter totter. Right. I get a hit of dopamine. I feel good. But the brain, because it wants to keep you motivated to go get the things that you need to survive starts immediately trying to push back on the Teeter totter. It wants you to feel some sort of pain.

**Justin Angle:** So that you go solve the problem, go solve the problem.

**Bryce Ward:** And it used to be that that would, you know, that took time and effort. And so like the brain didn't have to work very hard to push back. Sure. Yeah. Right. But like I just ate some candy. Right. And there's, you know, you'll notice this, most people will notice this, which is I ate some candy. I should go get some more candy. Yeah.

Right. And so I just get up off the couch and walk back to the candy area and get another, get another handful of M and Ms.

**Justin Angle:** But the interesting inflection point is it's not that the candy makes us feel good. And I want more of that. It is that the absence of candy makes me feel bad in order to avoid feeling bad. I go get more candy. That's right. So you're, you're, you're never actually increasing your wellbeing. You're avoiding the lack of wellbeing.

**Bryce Ward:** In many ways, that's the challenge, right. Is that, you know, what I took from dopamine nation is social media is a different form of abundance, right? Yeah. You know, and she talks about it as, as look for some people that is what gives them hits of dopamine. And it's immediate,

**Justin Angle:** A lot of it's non conscious.

**Bryce Ward:** It's non conscious.

**Justin Angle:** There. I get it outta my phone. It's autopilot.

**Bryce Ward:** We have to develop language around it. We have to develop habit around it. We have to learn how to manage our dopamine in a world of relative abundance. When I can find a way to satisfy that craving that my brain is saying, oh, that would feel good. Right. You know, without having to do much work. Right. Yeah. You know, and that's, that's the challenge we have with living with abundance and what we have what's new right now. I mean, so we've had dopamine issues with sugar

and alcohol and drugs for cages for, for a long time. We're now understanding it better. And hopefully that will lead to better treatments for those types of addictions. But what we have now, we have made information and entertainment as abundant as possible. Essentially, we have this media ecosystem and it's not just social media. Right.

**Justin Angle:** The streaming, you know, and, and going back to those indirect effects, what are we giving up? Right. We've made it so easy. I don't know about you, but do you remember like high school and college spending hours walking around the video store?

**Justin Angle:** Oh yeah.

**Bryce Ward:** Trying to find the, you know, a movie right now. Sometimes that happens when I have so many, I have like the, literally the entire library of movies and television to watch and I'm like, which should I find? But like, for the most part, it's like, my head thinks it, oh, I should watch X.

**Bryce Ward:** Sure. Boop.

**Justin Angle:** Or Netflix has created it before you even knew you needed it. Yeah. And you just take their, their recommendation and you go with it.

**Bryce Ward:** And it's just there. And like, you know, I mean, I don't, it's like, well, why would I, I don't need to, this is great. Like, you know, and some part of it, it is, it is great.

But like in terms of what are we giving up in terms of actual relationships with other humans?

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. What is it stealing from us?

**Bryce Ward:** You know, it's, there's, there's real cost, um, in terms of just what kind of relationships we're having and you know, what are we doing with our lives and what are we getting out of it? And, you know, I think we have to, so hopefully the solution is what Lembke is suggesting in dopamine nation, which is we have to learn how to manage this Teeter totter that she describes of, you know, essentially what she describes as, you know, you get the good stuff and then your brain pushes what she calls gremlins on the other side mm-hmm <affirmative> and the more you keep pushing, the more gremlins it does, more gremlins are out there. And the more gr those gremlins start to cause chronic pain, maybe anxiety, maybe depression, maybe all of these things that we're seeing such in such high rates is because we have solve some of our, what we thought of as problems, right? We solve scarcity problems, which is economist.

**Bryce Ward:** That's the whole thing. We wanna solve scarcity problems. Only to discover that our brains are, are hardwired for scarcity. We've seen this obviously in economic development forever, right? It's like, oh, well solve this problem by like building this thing. And then it's like, well, that created this problem. Oh, we're gonna be, you know, this just constant engineering that we have to keep going through is it's a challenge. And, you know, but hopefully getting to this part of our brains and starting to understand it will give us new tools, new language, new norms will take some time,

which will allow us to live with the abundance in ways that aren't making us sad, unhappy, suicidal, uh, whatever, all these kinds of things that are real problems.

**Justin Angle:** As we close, though, Bryce, I would like to leave listeners with two recommendations for how to address this problem in yourself. If some of the things we've talked about resonates with you, uh, two things that have worked well for me are, yeah, Montana's a big state with a lot of areas that don't have connectivity. Get out into those areas. You know, this is May and, uh, the weather's getting better. The access to the high countries, getting better, get out there, you know, disconnect yourself with intention, leave the phone behind. The other thing that I do is I set my phone to gray scale, try that for a week, set your phone to gray scale. You can do it in the iPhone and we'll publish a link to how to do that in the show notes, but set your phone to gray scale, commit to it for a week, turn back the color and you'll understand how your brain responds to the stimulus. You'll feel it so dramatically that you might be compelled to stick with the gray scale because you'll notice what the, uh, color and the interaction of the interface is doing to you. Any, uh, recommendations you have?

**Bryce Ward:** Well, yeah, there are various apps which will allow you to try and self commit to less time. The first recommendation, which is what I have done, which is remove all of it from your phone. Yeah. That's a good way to do it. You know, like make, put, put barriers between you and the dopamine hit, you know, at least make you go get your computer,

**Justin Angle:** Just like the walk to the next banana tree.

**Bryce Ward:** That's right. And you know, and then the other thing which is, this is broader, you know, what Lembke describes is what, you know, what she did with her kids was she did a lot of F she called forced marches. Right? Mm. So, you know, I think this is why the, the evidence on exercise is so compelling on why it's so good for us in terms of our mental health and wellbeing is you're punish, you know, you're basically saying, oh, I'm pushing on the other side. I'm making us myself feel the pain. And then your brain is doing the exact reverse. It's putting the gremlins on the, on the pleasure side. And it's a way of trying to help, you know, do things that will help you modulate. Don't just seek pleasure. Yeah. You've gotta find the balance. Uh, so figure out what helps you find the balance and, you know, try and do that.

**Justin Angle:** I refer to it as mandatory fun with my kids. So go out and have some mandatory fun. Yeah. They might not see it quite that way, but that's the way I frame it. Anyway. Bryce always fun to reconnect. And, uh, we, I look forward to continuing this conversation or our next installment and until then be well.

**Bryce Ward:** All right. Thanks, Justin.

**Justin Angle:** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from studio 49, a generous gift from university of Montana alums, Michelle and Loren Hansen. A new angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee, and Montana Public Radio. Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt, and John Wicks made our music.

Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things. Sound thanks a lot and see you next time.