

A New Angle

Episode 55

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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.

Justin Angle: Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today is our July edition of Incentives & Instincts, a recurring series in which I speak with economist and friend Bryce Ward about some of the broader challenges facing our society. Bryce, how are you today?

Bryce Ward: I am good. Justin, how are you?

Justin Angle: Good. It finally feels like summer for real this time.

Bryce Ward: It's time.

Justin Angle: Let's enjoy. So, in May, we talked about the effects of social media on our mental health. Last month, we considered its effects on our democracy. And this month, we're going to attempt to offer some solutions. I think you and I are both the sorts of people that we can rail about problems, but we really like to focus on solutions to the extent possible before we begin.

Bryce, you've used this nice metaphor of pollution as a useful way for thinking about the effects of social media in our information ecosystem.

Bryce Ward: You know, I think the information ecosystem, I think that's a useful metaphor, is really the Internet and social media that have really shaped our current information ecosystem. But they can change how we see ourselves, how we see our neighbors, our communities, our country, our world. And while some of that's fine or even good, a lot of it is not. If we think about, well, what's the thread? It's pollution, right? You know, to the extent that we're responding to an ecosystem which is making us feel bad or us think worse of people, or us not be able to move collectively to solve our problems, then we have to, you know, okay, well, let's figure out how to deal with that. And I think pollution gives us a useful framework for thinking about, okay, well, how do we address pollution problems? So, we have to say oh, what pollution do we want to get rid of? How much pollution is too much? Because some is fine. You know, we're having to deal with that.

Justin Angle: Yeah, in any system there is waste.

Bryce Ward: How do we decide what it is we actually are trying to get rid of from the system? And then once you kind of have a goal, a vision, well, how do you execute? How do you achieve that?

Justin Angle: And so, yeah, and this framework you propose, Bryce, you know, you talk about reduction, talk about resilience, and you talk about removal. Let's maybe start with where should we start?

Bryce Ward: Well, let's start with resilience. The idea with resilience is, you know, so in the pollution framework, it's all like, can we make the world less susceptible to pollution, right? You know, can we engineer things differently? You know, so if we're talking about like air pollution, which is very bad for humans, you know. Well, we can engineer filtration into buildings and, you know, all that so we can do things that make us more resilient. So, the same thing happens with social media, right? So, we got to make better humans and we've got to make a better society. And no one's going to like my proposed solutions on this or not many of them. The first one...

Justin Angle: It's like it's like dental floss, right?

Bryce Ward: Yeah. You know, I mean.

Justin Angle: Spoiler alert.

Bryce Ward: Yeah. Okay, fine. Education. That's fine. I, you know, to the extent that, you know, this is going to be part of our society, just like we have alcohol education and all this other kind of...

Justin Angle: Harm mitigation.

Bryce Ward: Yeah, you know, we need to start training kids at a young age to understand the Internet, what it can do to you and what it can do to us. And, you know, try and make sure that people are, we at least attempt to give people tools to help ensure that? I don't think that would be very controversial. Right. Where I get more controversial is well, how do you build a resilient society? You know, one of the pernicious effects of social media and the Internet is it erodes trust. It makes us see the worst in other people. Right. And it's not just social media it's also the Internet. Right. So, it does it in two ways. So first, it raises the salience of bad acts, right? So, because somebody can film something on their phone and go viral, you know, showing somebody behaving badly.

Justin Angle: And we've talked about how all the algorithms sort of support this, and you perpetuate this enragement because it keeps you engaged.

Bryce Ward: You know, and we just, I think we get a warped perspective on how frequent these behaviors are. You know, it's not like, you know, it's like, oh, these people, those people are all bad.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And I think within that too, there's also just this like, how much information does a human being need? Like, there's a lot of stuff, good and bad and otherwise going on in

the world on any given day. There's how many, many billions of people out there like, I don't need to know about all of it. And there's probably the level of awareness each one of us has of so many things happening in the world is probably suboptimal at this point.

Bryce Ward: This is our information ecosystem. This is the pollution in our information ecosystem is we are far too aware of stuff that does not matter for us. Right. And because our brains don't think very good probabilistically right, we tend to, well we see it, we see it all the time. Every day the Internet feeds me the bad cop. Every day the Internet feeds me the random violent crime caught on the security footage. If you don't filter that, if you don't have some ability to kind of put it back into perspective. Right. You know, I mean, it's the media. I mean, you know, if it bleeds, it leads. You know, if it enrages, the algorithm loves it. Right. And so, I think we live in a world where our perspective on reality is not correct.

Justin Angle: So how do we make us more resilient to that problem?

Bryce Ward: Well, this is the part that people aren't going to like, which is you have to actually go engage in the real world. Right.

Justin Angle: Wait, what's that?

Bryce Ward: In an ideal world, we would just do this with kind of sheep. You know, the low hanging fruit is you build better infrastructure for people to meet up in third places, all that kind of stuff, or.

Justin Angle: Restore some of our civic institutions.

Bryce Ward: Restore place and support programing in that place. Right. And you know, and then, you know, hopefully that's a carrot that draws people out in back into the world where they're like, oh, this is really nice. I like this. But in practice, I actually have, my ideas are more heavy handed. I am increasingly of the mindset that we should have public service requirements.

Justin Angle: Okay. Beyond just military commitment.

Bryce Ward: No. Yeah. Or like, you know, like in many countries when you graduate from high school, you then move into either military service or public service. It's a requirement. I know that's controversial. I know it's costly. But, you know, I think we need more randomized exposure to other people in the world. There's lots of evidence that suggests that when you're exposed to people who are different than you, your views of them become far more benign and you converge on many of their views.

Justin Angle: Yeah, the key piece there is randomized, right? Because more and more we are selecting into communities of sameness on so many dimensions and increasingly it's on a single dimension, which is politics.

Bryce Ward: Yeah, and that's and then you know, the other piece which I've mentioned on here before is I do think that we should have public service juries. So public policy juries. Again, put me into rooms with random people and force me to confront a problem and hear how people think. You know, look, it's not always, you know, this is something we should be experiment with. We should understand the set of tradeoffs, all that kind of stuff. But in terms of how do I build a more resilient society, one that's less susceptible, because again, what does social media do to us? It polarizes us. It moves everything into moral and, you know, and it feeds me algorithmically. Anything that says like, oh, they are bad.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And you are right, and you're actually more right than you think.

I am right I'm even more right and they are bad, right? And I think we have enough evidence base now to say that. Well, when you force people to actually then go and interact with other humans who have different views and, you know, do so in ways which are, can, you know, create the environment that's constructive for those conversations where people can approach it with curiosity and question and have that kind of dialog and facilitation that, you know, leads them to kind of get out of the fighting position and more into well, let me understand. Right. And then, okay, well, what about this? And, you know, all that kind of stuff. And so, you know,

my hope would be that we could do that, you know, essentially rebuild social capital. And hopefully by rebuilding social capital, engaging with other people, improving our institutions around that, we can restore trust in each other and in institutions. So that yeah, the noise of the Internet, you know, the food fight in the lobby can, you know, if we can't get rid of it, it can still go on, but we can contain the damage.

Justin Angle: We're just stronger people and a stronger community. And so yeah, the effects of the pollution are not quite the same.

Bryce Ward: So that's, that's, that's option one. It requires us investing in ourselves and our society. It avoids some of the challenges which I'm sure that we have to talk about here in a second, which is, well, if I want to try and reduce or remove. Or, you know, which are basically just more heavy-handed regulation of the space.

Justin Angle: Yeah. So, let's move to reduce because I think there we find a mix of sort of policy prescriptions and some changes we can make to how the businesses operating in social media actually run.

Bryce Ward: So, when you talk to economists about reduction of something, usually we're going to say, well, I can try and change the price that will reduce the quantity.

Justin Angle: Sure. Yep.

Bryce Ward: Or I can just regulate the quantity. Typically, economists like price over quantity, you know, regulating price over quantity. But, you know, there's tradeoffs and some of that depends on what you're trying to do and how you decided to get rid of this, all this kind of stuff. Right. So, you know, at least as an experiment, I would love to see what would happen if we forced social media companies to live and die in an economic model where basically everybody who's using the space posting and consuming it is not paying for it.

Justin Angle: Yeah, right. So, the attention economy, you're saying blow up the attention economy.

Bryce Ward: If you can't ban it outright tax advertising on social media at rates that effectively prohibit it. And, you know, and look, once you got that system set up, well, then you could actually develop systems where based on what you're posting, the price changes.

Justin Angle: Sure. How valuable is it, how useful is it? How accurate is it?

Bryce Ward: Are you posting, you know, about, you know, information that's just like, oh, hey, there's a community meeting. Okay, fine. That's free.

Justin Angle: That's free.

Bryce Ward: Don't care. You know, are you ranting about politics?

Justin Angle: Price goes up.

Bryce Ward: Price goes up. You know, because that's polluting the information space, right? I don't need to hear your rant on politics. We could experiment with trying to create a price structure that basically says, well, look, these are the things that are bad. We could start to change prices and it doesn't get rid of it, it doesn't ban it. Right. But it basically says you gotta pay for it.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And that pricing can, like you said, it goes, it can go in a variety of different ways. You can have a price function based on what you post. You can charge the viewer, you could charge the poster. You think of the number of people in this economy that use social media to monetize their following. You could make your price a function of the number of followers you have.

Bryce Ward: Yeah, I'm a big Substack person and I'm trying to get you to subscribe to my Substack like, well, great. You know, we're going to charge you more. And look, you know, obviously whenever you move to pricing things, the obvious complaint is, well, some people can, it's, you know, they have greater ability to pay. You know that's one of the inherent unfairnesses of any kind of pricing system. But you know, look, you could couple it with quantity restrictions. You could do other things where you're banning, you know, saying, look,

you can only see this many posts, you can only post this many posts. If that's, you know, the point is, is that we have tools if we want to say we want to reduce the volume of pollution entering the stream, pricing mechanisms or some form of quantity restriction, it does the job.

Justin Angle: I think there's a couple more opportunities within that as well. So take Twitter in the retweet function. I've heard some ideas around having a mechanism where somebody cannot retweet something they haven't read. So, if it's a link, you know, there are software tools where you can detect if an article has been opened and viewed for a period of time. You could have a filter that if you have some sort of a post that slows down the speed with which you can post it. Right? Like, are you sure you want to post this or things that essentially slow down the mechanism?

Bryce Ward: So certainly, to the extent that you can create some sense of automated sentiment analysis. Of oh, this is an angry tweet. Well, you know, and then you can both A slow the speed at which, you know, you can put additional do you really want to post this? Do you really want to, you know, essentially you can raise the cost.

Justin Angle: We double dog dare you not to post this.

Bryce Ward: And then you know and then once it's been flagged within the company like again, they have the ability to then depress the algorithm on it.

Justin Angle: Yes.

Bryce Ward: Now they have no incentive to do this.

Justin Angle: In the current model.

Bryce Ward: In the current model, this is actually antithetical to their business model, which is why it's bad, which is why it requires us collectively to come in and say, we're tired of this pollution, we want to remove it. Yeah, we did the Clean Air Act. You know, we've done a lot to reduce pollution. Not that we've eliminated it, but we've done a lot to reduce the stream of pollution entering our, into our, particularly our air, but also our water. And, you know, I think we need to start building momentum to get to the point where we try and do that with our information ecosystem. You know, and honestly, it doesn't just have to be social media. I mean, I think this is the entire information system. This is television, this is radio, this is the Internet. You know, we have to get to a world and where that the ecosystem in which we're existing is one that is conducive to healthy, you know, being healthy as an individual, but most importantly, can help us sustain a society that is, as of right now, reasonably prosperous. Right. We should, you know, not blow that up because some algorithms convinced us that, you know, everybody else is evil and more immoral. And even though they're our neighbors and if we actually just interacted with them, we probably think they're probably fine.

Justin Angle: We'll be back to my conversation with Bryce Ward after this short break.

Justin Angle: Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Brice Ward about how to fix social media.

Justin Angle: That pricing mechanism, Bryce I mean I think that one is particularly compelling in that you can build a business model with it. Now that's an empirical question, to see if you can build a business model as good as the advertising driven business model. I mean that the Facebook business model is arguably one of the best ever created, so it'd be hard to beat that. But then again, if the result is a healthier society, there are big returns to that.

Bryce Ward: Yeah. You know, like just because something could be a successful, profitable business doesn't mean we have to allow it. We regulate business models which have adverse impacts on society. And to the extent that we're developing an evidence base that suggests that these types of businesses have an adverse impact on society. I have no qualm saying well your business is bad for society and if you want to succeed you know we're going to push you into this model. And would I ever pay to post on social media? I can't imagine. But maybe, maybe somebody would.

Justin Angle: If it's a way to connect with more people and get more viewers, then maybe it's a spend worth making. For you if it leads to more, you know, clients in your consulting practice or whatever there's probably a price benefit ratio at which it starts to make sense. And the effect of that is you're not so likely to just rip off some angry tweet because you're just ticked off

about, you know, being in line at the grocery store or the article you just read or whatever it is that makes you angry you're going to think twice about that. If you have to pay to post it.

Bryce Ward: Depending on what you're posting, the price doesn't have to be prohibitive. Right. And that's the key. Right.

Justin Angle: Yeah, a couple cents.

Bryce Ward: That, you know, you just have to get a price to a level where, A, it can support the business model. But, B, you're trying to get people to think twice about what they're posting, you know? And so, you're hopefully getting higher quality tweets, higher quality Facebook posts, stuff that's more in line. And then, you know, I guess the way you can, you know, if you fully market base it, right, which is, you know, if you also make people pay to consume tweets, yeah, I'm going to filter out my feed a lot. Right? I'm not just going to be like scrolling through stuff I don't like. Right. Yeah, no, that guy posts a lot of stuff I'm not interested in, remove, unfollow. And so, you know, it basically puts you into the situation where if I want to post, to the extent that I can still get people to come pay attention to me, I get the benefits of being an "influencer" or I get to influence, you know, whatever, or I get to sell whatever else I'm trying to sell because I could still go on. Most people who post, it's a small group of people who are the ones who are posting the majority of stuff. Many of them, I'm sure it would still be worth it. Paying for it with our attention and creating the incentive mechanism which led to the algorithms which led to well, like, you know, all they those companies care about is your

engagement. That's how they make their money. That's literally their only directive. They want to make money. They make money by getting you to spend the dozens of hours a week that they're getting people to spend on these platforms. And something like a third of time people are spending on their phone on social media is self-control problems. Let's help people manage those self-control problems. Give them tools, let's make it easier so that we can get that down. Is that good for the business model of the social media companies? No, it's not. But is it good for the individuals? Is it good for the rest of us as a society? I think we need to be pursuing rigorously the idea that we should understand what those potential benefits are at a level we don't currently understand, so that we can design an effective regime that hopefully reduces the amount of pollution that we allow to enter the information ecosystem.

Justin Angle: Well put. So, in our remaining time, let's talk about the last of the three R's, removal. And that's strictly kind of in the policy framework. Like, is this how do we remove some of this?

Bryce Ward: Well, this is what we fight about currently. Right.

Justin Angle: All or nothing kind of approaches.

Bryce Ward: So, this person said this, so they got banned or they got suspended. So, it's both removal of the post or removal of the poster. Right. And so, if you say something that is bad by whatever terms of service these private companies have set out, then it can get removed. If you

are persistently bad, you can get removed. Currently, this is basically all we have. We are at the nascent stage of resilience building. Right. You know, there is an increasing movement to try and help people understand the adverse consequences of social media so that they can better manage it themselves. There are some tools to help you there. So, we're early in that stage, but like, you know, it's about the policing rules. And yeah, these are private platforms. And so as far as I'm concerned, they should be allowed to be policed themselves however they want. And then the rest of us get to decide whether we use them. But to the extent that we're talking about regulating across platforms and trying to regulate just the general sense of what the information ecosystem is. We absolutely should be collectively having discussions. You know, and then implementing legislation designed to draw the boundaries in terms of what we are allowing people to say online. You know, what kind of pollution we want to allow. And even if that means revising the First Amendment, I am not an originalist in terms of the Constitution. We have to decide what we think is best for society in the 21st century. Montana's Constitution is 50 years old. You know, I do think we should be revisiting our own national constitution on a more frequent basis. The fact that we have not amended it in quite some time is, I think it's a problem. We should be getting to the point where we're like, wait a second, right. We need to have tools that allow our society to achieve the vision that we collectively want to see happen. We're not going to get 100% agreement on that collective vision, but we have to get to the point where, look, if a broad swath of society says, yeah, that's it, that's consistent with our vision. But we have all these arcane rules that basically say, no, we can't get to that vision. Well, we've got to have a system that allows us to get rid of those arcane rules. And, you know, I think that when it comes to understanding information pollution, I think we have to

have a conversation about what is inbounds and what isn't inbounds. Right. We don't have to all agree on it, but we should be able to get to some majority or even supermajority consensus of you don't get to post this, this, this and this, because we can point to studies that show that this has these adverse consequences. Just like I don't get to dump pollution in the water or in the air.

Justin Angle: Yeah. And there's a couple of pathways to that in the regulatory framework. One is to acknowledge that these companies, the social media companies, make editorial choices with their algorithms and therefore they're not protected by this platform exemption in section 230. Right. So then if you can sort of define these things as media organizations that make choices about what you see and don't see editorial choices, then you can put some parameters around how that's done. You could say that every post has to have review by a human being. Now, the social media companies will say that's impossible, we can't possibly do that. Well, you've built a business around, you built one of the most profitable businesses in the world around, you know, not having to do that, whereas newspapers do it, some better than others, obviously. But if you're a media company, maybe you have to have human beings make some of these choices. That's not to say it'll fix everything, but maybe it will be another mechanism for slowing down the spread of bad information.

Bryce Ward: The part of the challenge here. Right, both in the reduction and the removal piece is. How much does the platform need to generate in terms of content? Of certain types to even get people to show up at all. Right. You know, these are highly networked business models,

right? I joined because those people joined. And if those people don't post or don't post as much or they don't post the thing, you know, how much critical mass do they lose? And does it eventually reach a tipping point where, oh, I have to pay to post. So only it's basically just an advertising stream. And why would I want to go look at a bunch of ads so I'm not going to go there anymore and then it just dies. That's the challenge with removal and the reduction. By doing so, like, people are coming for the content and you're mucking with the recipe on the content. My view is still, well, look, if you can't survive based on what people are either willing to pay to post or what can exist within. For lack of a better term, you know, decency standards or whatever it is or, you know, non-pollution standards. Well, then the business needs to die. If nothing else, we should be trying to do a set of experiments which allow us to test some of these hypotheses and understand what those kind of tradeoffs are. I mean, we should. We are smart people. We should be able to figure out how to build an information system which allows people to learn about the world without having to participate in the food fight.

Justin Angle: And we haven't really even tried yet. You know, this is not a space where I think it makes sense to be hopeless. I think there's a lot of reason to hope that we can figure this out.

Bryce Ward: You know, in terms of figuring out the solutions, you know, just like figuring out how to create a vaccine against COVID. The technological problem, understanding the problem and understanding a set of tools that we can use to mitigate the problem. I think we can solve that. Our problems are in the implementation of those. Collective action in social media is really hard because everyone's outraged all the time. There's always a new outrage to be chasing

around. And collective action fundamentally requires compromise. Social media does not permit compromise. It's not that people didn't think bad things or do bad things in the past, but we weren't doing it all on display where the whole goal of the day is to try and figure out who we're going to beat up on. We have to get to a situation where the food fight, the noise, the yelling and screaming is no longer an impediment to compromise. We are learning about these effects. We have people who are understanding them. We have we have plenty of smart people to figure out, well, here's a regulation we could try. Here's, you know, and we could experiment with that. But I have very little confidence in our ability to actually do it in an environment where this media ecosystem, you know, it's basically just, well, you know, we let this happen and now it's the status quo. And anything that tries to change, you know, is, well, it's bad. You know, you just bring up all the ire. And, you know, obviously the people who have a vested interest in preserving it, well, they've got a lot of levers that they can pull to keep blocking it. And, you know, so we just have to get to a system where we can collectively act without it falling apart because of the noise. And, you know, that's the pollution that we have to get rid of. We have to get rid of the pollution, the noise in our system that allows us to see the worst in each other and be unable to sustain focus.

Justin Angle: Yeah, I agree with that, Bryce. That's probably the appropriate place to land the ship in this little three-episode mini-series on social media. Not sure we figured it all out, but this was a good start. I look forward to next month.

Bryce Ward: Yeah, I think if we are saying, yeah, you know, think about this as pollution and think about our information ecosystem, just the way we think about the natural ecosystem, like it's something that's worth protecting, keeping pollution out of. Hopefully we can get ourselves around at least a common language to start, start, a process.

Justin Angle: Yeah, you can't make it better unless you try. So, we're at least trying. So, appreciate that, Bryce. And we'll talk next month.

Bryce Ward: Awesome.

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 UM Alums, Michele and Loren Hansen.

Justin Angle: 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. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, social media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot and see you next time.