

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. I'm joined today by legendary Montana political journalist Chuck Johnson.

Chuck Johnson So what the current Montanans values are, I don't know. I think people want a good future for their young people. But a lot of the young people head off to Seattle and Portland and Denver. So, I don't...that's a really good question. What are the values we value in Montana? And I don't know.

Justin Angle During Chuck's 45 plus year reporting career, he covered 22 Montana legislative sessions and eight governors. Known by his colleagues as the dean of Montana politics, Chuck gave Montanans line of sight to many of our state's most transformational political moments. Chuck, thanks for being here today.

Chuck Johnson Happy to do it, Justin.

Justin Angle So where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Chuck Johnson, I grew up in Helena. My dad was an insurance underwriter, property and casualty underwriter. My mom was a homemaker who later went to work as an accountant for a furniture store. Help put us kids to college.

Justin Angle Yeah. And so, you came here to study journalism. At what stage did you decide that journalism was going to be what you wanted to study and what you wanted to do with your career?

Chuck Johnson Well, I didn't really know what I want to major in, and my dad pitched business, which he majored in. I was probably the shortest business major ever. I took one accounting course and dropped out. So, it was in college, and I actually wanted to be a sportswriter originally. And then I did that. I was the sports editor of the Kaimin for a year. And then I decided I really wanted to, you know, cover what was going on in the world and political world and general assignment, that sort of thing.

Justin Angle And straight from undergraduate to your master's in history?

Chuck Johnson That's sort of a checkered career, too.

Justin Angle Those are the best.

Chuck Johnson I kept getting this is the best short term journalism gig offers. And I had all my research done for my master's thesis and I kept postponing it. I'd write all day and I didn't feel like writing at night. And finally, eventually I did. So, it took a long time to get.

Justin Angle Yeah. And so, let's talk a little bit about, you know, your take on the current media environment here in Montana and beyond. I mean, we're living at such a time of there's a proliferation of sources, but at the same time, people tend to exist in their filter bubbles. Journalism in general is under pressure from a variety of different dimensions. What's your take of the media landscape right now?

Chuck Johnson Well, nationally, we sure have, you know, you can watch be a MSNBC watcher, CNN watcher, or a Fox News watcher, and that kind of categorizes that. I don't think we have that in Montana, although you can find elements of it around in podcasts and so on. Montana is going through a transition right now. We have the traditional sources, the newspapers, the Lee newspapers, the Great Falls Tribune, Bozeman Chronicle, those sort of things, weekly newspapers which play a critical role in small communities. And, you know, your old AM radio stations, a lot of them don't do much news anymore, but they're starting to. The newer and then public radio, which is doing a great job and have good public radio stations in Missoula here and one in Billings that between them they fan the state.

One of the interesting developments has been the start of nonprofit online news sources. And full disclosure, I'm on the board of directors of the Montana Free Press. It's based in Helena.

John Adams is the editor in chief. And it's been going for about five years, I think. But it's really been going about three years and it's just growing. For the session, I think they had five reporters, an editor and Helen Helena, part time editor and then a business side. The other one is new to Montana as of January, and that's the Daily Montanan, which is affiliated with a national group of nonprofits that have nonprofit papers online and a number of states, I think maybe 20 or 25 states. All of these groups had reporters at the legislature, or they were zooming it. I think safe to say there are more reporters in the Capitol or zooming this past legislative session than ever. And that's a good sign.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Chuck Johnson The more the merrier. And there can be some specialization. Maybe someone's an expert in fish, wildlife and parks issues, someone on health care, taxes and budget, you know, that sort of thing.

Justin Angle So you see a lot of consolidation on sort of the corporate side of media. But this rise of the nonprofit organizations, what do you think is fueling that? And what else do you think is enabling those entities to sort of gain share and sustain themselves financially?

Chuck Johnson Well, some of them surfaced when there were cutbacks in Montana in the traditional news sources. Lee newspapers made a number of cutbacks to reduce the number of employees. I was one of them. And same with some of the other news organizations. The AP

once had like seven, eight, nine people in Helena. Now they have two. Great Falls Tribune, which once was certainly, if not the best, one of the best newspapers in Montana, for the first time since the mid 40s did not have a Capitol Reporter at the legislative session. They had they've long had capital coverage. I hope that they'll change that and get another reporter over there. In some ways, it was a reaction to losing all the coverage that had been there in other ways, you know, they can do different things where you don't have to worry about selling ads. And this is happening around the country. There's a lot of interest in this. Nationally, you know, The New York Times and Washington Post were basically laying off reporters and editors. The Post until Jeff Bezos bought it. The Times struggled and then they found a way to sell the Times digitally and their subscription rates have gone way up. I can read it in the post every morning. And in Helena, you know, instead of having a subscription mail to you, which would take a week or looking at the library. So, this is there are a lot of changes happening. I don't know where it all ends, but it's very encouraging. And public television is doing more in Montana, too. And then my old colleague, Mike Dennison is the lead political reporter for Montana Television Network. And he's really up the game there, too. I think Mike is still does a terrific job. So, you've got a lot of mixtures. And I think people can find news and a lot of places and a lot of it's free.

Justin Angle So let's talk about your experience as a reporter. I mean. Forty-five plus years covering Montana politics, you've sort of had a front row seat to so many of the transformational events in Montana history. How would you describe Montana politics?

Chuck Johnson Well, we go through cycles. When I started reporting, it was kind of the modern progressive era. With a new constitution for the state in 1972, reorganizing state government in the executive branch in 1971. Major changes in the progressives control things, environmental legislation in the early 70s, kind of in reaction to the control by them, by the Anaconda company and other mining companies. So, then we had the progressive era. Then a conservative era when Reagan became president nationally. And it's kind of gone back and forth. What we're seeing right now is the modern conservative movement for sure. And for the first time in 16 years, there's a Republican governor in — Greg Gianforte. Now we had mostly Republican legislatures over those 16 years and the two governors, Brian Schweitzer and Steve Bullock, vetoed a lot of these bills that passed this year and are very controversial. So, the big question to me is whether, you know, the modern Republican boom is sort of a spin off on Trump's popularity in Montana or not and we'll see that in '22 and '24. Whether it's an aberration or whether Montana is, in fact joining Idaho, Wyoming and the Dakotas as a red state.

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, what are some of the forces you think are driving that? We hear a lot in Montana about urban rural divide, for example. What are some of the factors that you think contributed to these cycles?

Chuck Johnson Well, a big one was the loss of union jobs in the mining industry, in the smelting and refinery industry. Right now, I think over half the union jobs in Montana are people you might call white collar workers: teachers, professors, state and local government

employees. So, the so-called blue-collar unions are really shrinking. We don't have many sawmills open anymore. We don't have many mines open anymore. A lot of the timber jobs, logging jobs are gone. That's hurt the Democratic Party in Montana. We've also seen demographic changes. A lot of the rural areas that occasionally elected Democrats to the legislature don't anymore. Democrats do not seem to be able to appeal to a lot of rural areas. Used to be kind of a Labor Farm Coalition with the Montana Farmers Union playing a big role in that with the Montana AFL-CIO. That's sort of died but maybe coming back, you know. Governor Schweitzer's brother, Walter, is now head of the Montana Farmers Union and he's trying to rebuild that group with the help of his members. The other thing is that the demographic trends we've got Western Mantrap, Montana, just growing like topseed. And a lot of the places aside from Billings, which is growing, but a lot of the places in eastern Montana are shrinking.

So how that works, I don't know. But we'll see some of it with the new Redistricting and Apportionment Commission that'll start working this year, first to pick the districts for two congressional seats. It's very interesting that Montana has regained its second congressional seat. We're the first state in the history of this country to gain a seat after we've lost one.

Justin Angle Oh, interesting. So, we lost our seat, what, in 1990 something?

Chuck Johnson Yep.

Justin Angle And just regained it this cycle. What's your take on that process? How are things going?

Chuck Johnson Well, they haven't been able to really do much until they get the county-by-county numbers. I don't think those are coming out until August or September.

Justin Angle Mm hmm.

Chuck Johnson So the big question is, well, how do you divide Montana into two. Traditionally, east and west. And the West was traditionally held by a Democrat, the east by a Republican. But like I said, the growth has been in the West, mostly. So how do you do that? There have been some proposals online to do it north, south. You know, you have to protect the Indian reservations. That's a critical component. Most of them vote democratically pretty heavily. I don't know what they'll do. They're going to be a lot of arguments for keeping counties that traditionally were in the western district in the West if they go that east-west route.

One of the most interesting counties is Gallatin, where Bozeman is. And it's really grown. Yeah, I don't remember all the stats, but a few years ago, they were the, I think the second largest growing county in the country.

Justin Angle I think you're right. Yeah.

Chuck Johnson And Gallatin County has gone from a mostly they would elect some Democrats to the legislature, but always a reliable county for Republicans. Just the opposite now. It's a Democratic district. They were one of the few counties in Montana to vote for Hillary Clinton for president in 2016. So, and still, they elect, within the city of Bozeman, a lot all Democrats. And in the rural areas, I believe all Republicans. So, there's that split there.

Justin Angle Yeah. I want to shift gears just a little bit and kind of you know, if we look back on the 2020 election in particular, you heard, you know, candidates of all stripes talking about Montana values, you know, espousing their Montana values. So, everybody's saying Montana values, but it seems like they're talking about different things, so, you know, what is the rhetoric and what is actually in your experience, what are the sort of are there a set of Montana values that unite folks in some way?

Chuck Johnson Well, I think they used to be education, college education and K through 12. I think that they wanted people to be able to afford to live here. That's in jeopardy now, I think. The education. I think we've got a history of not funding education very well. You know, I think people want health care. As much as Republicans denounce Medicaid expansion, or some Republicans do, I think Medicaid expansion has saved rural hospitals in Montana, which were in grave danger of going under. And now doctors and hospitals get paid for their services. So, what the current Montanans values are, I don't know. I think people want a good future for their young people, but a lot of the young people head off to Seattle and Portland and Denver for careers. In my generation a lot of them have come back. You know, they want to raise their

family in Montana. So, I don't I don't that's a really good question of what are the values we value in Montana, and I don't know,

Justin Angle It seems like it can be used as code for something, you know, whether it's a certain type of values or whatever it is. It's a phrase that everybody says and it's not quite clear what it means.

Chuck Johnson Yeah. I mean, is it Republicans who want government off people's back? But they do want the covid relief. You know, Democrats want jobs, good paying jobs and union jobs. It would be a really interesting series of shows just to look at. Well, what are the values you bring? Is that lower taxes is more you know, more government services? Montana's one of the very few states in the country that doesn't have pre-K education.

Justin Angle Right.

Chuck Johnson Bullock brought in a lady who headed the program in Alabama, and she told us that it's popular across party lines that the legislature had just given them like 60 million more for the next year. So, they were pouring money into it. Apparently from what I've read, the evidence is pretty overwhelming. It pays its big bang for the buck. We can't seem to do that in Montana.

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, that seems like we're talking about values that would seem like an area where you can start to build productive collaboration around you. We all care about our children, and we want to create a future for our children. Yeah, we might have some debate about what that future should look like. But early childhood education seems like a great place to start.

Chuck Johnson I think fair to say we don't of the state does not do a great job of funding K through 12. We have the lowest teacher pay in the region, if not nationally, one of the lowest. Our universities are terribly underfunded, as you well know. We're behind in a lot of categories and it's hard to make it up, all up in one fell swoop. But we need to start doing something like that, in my opinion.

Justin Angle And you mentioned some of the factors that are shifting in Montanans economy, you know, the decline of the extraction industry and the rise of the tech sector, particularly in Bozeman here in Missoula as well. I mean, what do you think the role is of that industry as we move forward? And how does that cut across the political dimensions?

Chuck Johnson Well, I think it's very promising. Do we do enough here compared to other states? I don't know the answer to that. As I understand it, Greg Gianforte and his wife started right now technologies in their garage or basement.

Justin Angle Right.

Chuck Johnson And eventually employed, I think seven or eight hundred six or seven hundred people, average pay 90,000 dollars. Another business is down there is one that is called Zoot Enterprises out of Four Corners. Same kind of story, you know. They were in these little hotel cabins, motel cabins outside of Bozeman. Now they have a giant building at Four Corners. So, there's a lot of promise there, I think. The question is to me, well, what do our universities and schools need to do to prepare people to work in these businesses? Do we do enough? I don't I don't know the answer to that.

Justin Angle Yeah. I mean, I think we don't do enough, but I think we're trying. I know that a lot is happening at both UM and MSU in those domains. I think we have to because, you know, we got a lot of influx of employers, and they need talent. They tell us we need people that can do X, Y and Z and, you know, we need to do a better job filling that demand.

Chuck Johnson Well, one example, too, is the state has had a program to give tax incentives to filmmakers here, and they've used that money. There are a number of television shows and movies and they wanted more, and they didn't get this from that amount from the last legislative session. So that seems to me to hold promise. There are a lot of critics of it saying, why give money to a film industry that's rolling in money? But I don't think that's the case with all of them. And a lot of the independent filmmakers certainly aren't.

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, you see the Yellowstone production, the Kevin Costner production that, you know, for a while they were sort of headquartered here in Missoula. And you just see the number of people employed in that enterprise. So, it's a lot of jobs. How durable those jobs are is sort of unclear, but it's a lot of people working. And, you know, money in that space is certainly an opportunity.

Chuck Johnson Well we have the beautiful landscape, the rivers, the mountains, the prairies, I personally think we should do all we can to invest in that because I think there will always be demand.

Justin Angle We'll be back to our conversation with legendary Montana politics reporter, Chuck Johnson, after this short break.

Justin Angle Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm here with journalist, Chuck Johnson, reflecting on his over forty-five years covering Montana politics.

So, let's pull the lens back a little bit. I mean, we mentioned at the onset you studied history as a master's student here. I mean, and that's one thing that's been noteworthy in your reporting. And not only have you covered such a long span of Montana politics, but also, you know, infusing your reporting with a historical perspective. In a world where our news cycle is, you know, minutes or, you know, 140 characters long, you know, how important do you think it is for readers and consumers of media to sort of understand where we sit historically?

Chuck Johnson I think it's critical. And, you know, there are some really good history books, and some were good history professors. I always like to see them in stories where appropriate.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Chuck Johnson And, you know, it does go in cycles. When I was 23 years old, I got to cover the 1972 Constitutional Convention. You know, they did a couple of things that were pretty interesting. One. Democrats had a big majority, but they agreed to sit in alphabetical order, A through Z, not the Democrats on one side of the aisle, the Republicans on the other. I wrote a couple of columns about why doesn't the legislature do that? No one ever took me up, but I still think it's a great idea.

Justin Angle It is. I mean, and it seems so antithetical to the sensibilities right now. I mean, the other side is the enemy.

Chuck Johnson Yeah. And I thought, well, maybe we needed an initiative to do that or something like that because I think it forced them to work together. And they didn't always agree but, you know, in the end, they all signed the Constitution as proposed. Nine other ten of the hundred ultimately came out against it, but the vast majority were for it.

Justin Angle Mm hmm.

Chuck Johnson So it's this question of how do we get people to work together despite their sharp political differences?

Justin Angle Yeah. I mean, what in your view and experience, what have been those things that have been able to break those issues or topics that have been able to break through and get people working together productively in good faith?

Chuck Johnson We have two sharply divided political parties that, you know, their business is not to work with the other, at least at the organizational level. But one of the more interesting things I covered as a legislative reporter was the moderate formation of moderate Republicans starting in 2011, 2013, and they were able to work with Democrats to get things passed on education, that sort of thing. That was encouraging and would be encouraging if the D's could work with the R's too on some things. They're not going to agree on everything, but I think there are some things they can agree on.

Justin Angle Yeah. You know, whether it's agreement or not, just the sort of assumption of bad faith in the other side, it seems super toxic to me and quite destructive. And then it seems like you've got both parties that seemingly more and more unmoored from actual political ideologies. In a way, it's not so much about, hey, we believe that the role of government is X or Y, it's that we believe that we just need to win.

Chuck Johnson It's all about winning. And, you know, we have a state legislature that meets for 90 days every two years.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Chuck Johnson You know, it's absurd in this time that you can imagine Bullock a business, a corporation board of directors meeting every other year for 90 days. I mean, things change so fast. They're federal decisions, laws, court decisions they have to adjust for. And so, we have a part time legislature that, you know, we don't want we don't want professionals, but do we want all these amateurs is the question? I mean, I think if we had an annual session that maybe met 45 or 50 days a year, they'd be much more responsive to ongoing problems and be able to address them.

Justin Angle Yeah and not in the middle of the winter when it's the hardest hard to get to Helena and all of that.

Chuck Johnson Interesting this session with the resume.

Justin Angle Sure.

Chuck Johnson And people, you know, from Glasgow and Libby and Glendive could get on there and make their feelings known. That's the first time that's happened. And I think it's

promising because, you know, if someone really feels strong about an issue, it means hopping in the car, driving two or three hundred miles on icy roads and getting there. And then good luck finding a parking spot anywhere near the capital.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Chuck Johnson So the Zoom to me holds some promise for people to testify at the legislature.

Justin Angle So talk a little bit more about that in terms of public engagement in the process, access to information. And we have Montana's open meeting laws and there's been, you know, a range of compliance for that at the legislative level. You know, you didn't cover this past legislative session, but. And what do you think are the stories that weren't covered that should be or, you know, what do you think were the questions that you maybe thought weren't answered adequately?

Chuck Johnson Well, I think one of the big stories that emerged from the session, and it was quite well covered, I think, was the legislature and an executive's battle against the judiciary. And the consequences of that. You know, the judiciary, we choose to elect judges here. Many of them are county attorneys before they are judges. So, they run as a partisan label for a county attorney. So, they are run as nonprofit people, but they have partisan backgrounds for the most part. And if someone resigns, someone appoints them based on the nominees screened by the Judicial Nomination Commission. So, I think there is a semblance of some screening. But

that's eliminated. Now the Governor is opening in Great Falls for a Judge, a District Judge. And now, he's got a committee to screen. So, we'll see how that works.

Too early to tell, but access to information, you know, we've had we've got strong right to know laws. I was on the board of directors for about 25 years for the Montana FOIA hotline, freedom press hotline. The big problem, just as with the federal government, is getting you can put in for an FOIA request with an agency. There's no time limit. There is you know, it can take years. They can redact parts of the things. One interesting development this time was that the legislature wanted the emails of the administrator of the Supreme Court, the director of the Department of Administration, got him over a weekend. That's unheard of. I hope that future requests from reporters as well as the public will go that fast. I know they won't. So, you know, we do have a commitment in our Constitution for openness. Public has a right to inspect documents, attend meetings unless the right to individual privacy exceeds the advantages of public disclosure. We sued, oh, in the late 90s to get into legislative caucuses. I tell people we kind of won the battle, but we lost the war. They now find ways to meet off campus or meet in groups of five, you know, that sort of thing.

Justin Angle Yep.

Chuck Johnson But I still think it was valuable to do. And so, we do have a pretty strong language in the Constitution to do those sort of things. But sometimes the execution isn't that great and a lot of work to be done there.

Justin Angle Indeed, so Chuck as we close here and you know, you know, a few years into retirement, what are the things that are exciting you about this next phase of life for you?

Chuck Johnson Well, we've done some traveling. We went to China a couple of years ago. We're hoping to do some traveling this summer when things settle down. I've been taking some MOLLI courses.

Justin Angle: Wonderful.

Chuck Johnson: And auditing some classes at Carroll College. Still interested. I was on the Historical Society board, wasn't reappointed, which is fine. And we all worked with a lot of people, and we played a small role in helping get funding for the new museum to be approved in 2017, I guess. So, I'm interested in history. I'm interested in, you know, the arts, interested in libraries, that sort of thing. Very, very loyal supporter of the University of Montana.

Justin Angle Mm hmm. We appreciate it.

Chuck Johnson Yeah, it's a great place. And, gosh, I hope it can pull its numbers up and stop the funding cuts. Those are very, very divisive and I hope unnecessary in the future.

Justin Angle Well, it's been great sort of learning more about your perspective, your sensibility brought your reporting. And, you know, thanks for your years of service and shining a light on so many of the things we as Montanans need to know.

Chuck Johnson Thanks a lot, Justin. It was a lot of fun.

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 Michele and Loren Hanson.

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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. See you next time.