

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

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Farewell to Chile: **Hasta la Vista Fences and Foxes**

By Peter Keller

MARCH, 2002

LASERENA, Chile—On the way home from work one day Pablo Valenzuela picked up a hitchhiker. Pablo, a Chilean friend, was living in the United States at the time. The two began chatting about the weather and sports; eventually they drifted into a discussion about their hometowns.

Hitchhiker: "Where are you from? California?"

Pablo: "No, actually I was born and raised in Chile. I came to the States for college and starting working here afterward."

Hitchhiker: "Really. Chile! Well, I never would have guessed because you sure don't look Asian."

Pablo: "That's because Chile is in South America. Do you know where that is?"

After spending two-thirds of my fellowship in Chile, I have written most of my newsletters focusing on this country. My impressions of Chile and its people have evolved over two years, especially whenever I left the country. Spending time outside Chile, mostly in Argentina — but also with visits to Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil and Uruguay — provided me the opportunity to distinguish stark differences and commonalities among South American neighbors. I've been collecting these thoughts and revelations for months to form this newsletter as a farewell to Chile — a sort of bookend to complement my initial impressions, written nearly two years ago.

By now, dedicated readers of my newsletters know where and what Chile is — that long, skinny country in South America best known for Augusto Pinochet and wine. Pinochet, currently in failing health, was the Army General who engineered the overthrow of Salvador Allende's elected socialist government in 1973. In textbook-dictator fashion he ruled Chile for the next 17 years. Chilean wine, exported around the world, is noted as one of the best wines for its value. I spent plenty of time trying to understand the significance of both to Chileans — one was easy to access and the other elusive.

First, the easy one — wine. To tease wine connoisseurs, a mid-range quality wine, such as *Concha y Toro's Casillero del Diablo*, sells for about US\$4.50 per bottle. Wine is the standard gift brought to any dinner party. It's common at such parties to see the entire kitchen table filled with wine bottles, emptied before morning light. Quality and low prices keep wine flowing throughout the day — at lunch, *Onces* (afternoon "tea") and dinner. When I was studying Spanish in Pucón, the then-94-year-old grandfather of my host family, Francisco, often told me the secret to his health was a daily intake of two "glasses" of wine (note that these were oversized shot glasses). Fortunately, *Don Francisco* is still ticking along — a healthy example of living the good life.

As for the elusive Pinochet, who has sidestepped charges of human rights

violations in both England and Chile, most Chileans don't debate his legacy publicly. Only once did I hear an intense discussion among my friends about Pinochet. It was Claudio, the socialist and strong Allende supporter, and Sergio, a die-hard Pinochet supporter, who clashed one afternoon. Six of us were walking along Puerto Varas' boardwalk, enjoying an after-lunch stroll on a rare sunny day. I can't remember how the conversation started, but minutes later only Claudio and Sergio remained. No better way to break up a social occasion than begin a political discussion. This lack of public debate is a result of paranoia developed during Pinochet's rule. Back then, not many spoke negatively about the dictatorship because they never knew who was listening or whom they would tell. As a result, the word *sapo* (frog, or informer) has come to signify one of the worst Chilean insults and *sapoculiado* is beneath translation. Often, Pinochet's National Central Intelligence Agency (CNI — *Central Nacional Inteligencia*) would use word-of-mouth information gathered by undercover agents to track down subversives. Many Chileans I've spoken with agree that a lack of trust among citizens, which still exists today, derived from Pinochet's command.

This lack of trust among Chileans surfaced one day while I was waiting for a connecting bus at a terminal in northern Chile. Waiting half-asleep at six in the morning, I was the only gringo in the bus station and I asked myself a common question: "What the heck am I doing here and why am I up so early?" At that moment, a woman with two kids and a pile of luggage asked me to look after her belongings while she took the young ones to the bathroom. Over 30 Chileans were in the room. Why did she ask me and not one of her countrymen? How odd! Imagine this same scene in the United States, and asking a foreigner to guard your luggage. I can't see it happening.

My perception that Chileans trust foreigners (except Argentines¹) more than their own fellow citizens was reinforced several months later. I was on a weekend mission to find a secret surf hideaway along the Pacific coast near Puerto Varas. Coming to the end of a road on an ocean cliff,

I pulled up to a farmhouse. Slowly approaching the front door by foot, I half expected someone to come charging out of the house with a gun pointed at me. I knocked nervously, hoping to get permission for beach access. A stable, mature woman answered the door and invited me to the kitchen. I told her of my mission and she pointed me in the right direction. As I departed, she said, "Come on back to the house for dinner after you finish surfing." When I returned and finished a delicious meal, she asked me, "Could you take my three daughters to Puerto Montt tonight? Tomorrow they begin classes early at the University." How odd again! I couldn't imagine this happening in the United States. My Chilean friends simply reckoned this display of trust and generosity as another benefit of being a foreigner. By the way, the surf was excellent.

Based on several experiences, I asked Carmen, a Chilean friend who has lived half her life in the United States (and the other half in Chile), about trust and lack-of-trust. Understanding the mentality of both nationalities, she explained to me that Chileans don't perceive that they have any protection against fraud and deceit by other Chileans.² Thus, they are all in the same "boat" together, and have to be fox-like, or as she put it, "*pillo*" (sly), because they understand their fellow countrymen all too well.

Of course, this comment is just a generalization, and with each example that comes to mind an exception usually follows. This lack of trust among citizens has developed an interesting dichotomy. Chile consistently ranks as the least corrupt country in Latin America, while the bureaucracy put in place to make sure that no one cheats is stifling. For example, every purchase — no matter how small — requires a receipt for the customer. Receipt copies kept by the vendor are used to determine monthly taxes paid to the Chilean Internal Tax Service. In both private and

public sectors, bureaucracy is an overriding theme, and probably for that reason overt corruption is not evident.

On a track parallel to the theme of fragile trust among Chileans, over time I began to notice an exorbitant amount of fences in the cities and countryside. My attention to fences



¹ Border disputes have marked the historical relationship between these two countries. I once heard an Argentinian saying about a risky activity: "That's more dangerous than a Chilean making maps."

² Chile is the only country in South America without a divorce law. Women in broken marriages caring for the children have few options for ensuring child support. I've met several mothers who wanted to leave the country with their children, but couldn't because the absent father/husband denied permission — which is needed to legally exit Chile.



(Top, left) This is the barbwire fence that began my obsessive desire to understand the relationship of Chileans with public and private space. Located along the only highway to Pucón, this fence was put up to block lake access. (Top, right) Tree trunks of different lengths are used in southern Chile to surround livestock pastures. (Below) With typical metal fences and iron bars on windows surrounding an urban home, this photo is from northern Chile. (Right) An ingenious landscape design: inverted tree roots placed along a property line in Chile's ninth region. (Bottom, right) Adobe wall topped with broken glass to maintain privacy in the desert.



took hold early, during my second month in Chile. Along my commute to Spanish-language school, I saw a barbwire fence one day that served no purpose, in my opinion. It was put up parallel to the highway, enclosing an undeveloped lakeside tract. This prompted me to begin a photo collection of fences, whether ugly, beautiful, useless or mysterious. I began to notice fences everywhere, enclosing houses, businesses, churches, farms and ranches. I gener-

ally kept my "fence fetish" to myself until one day when I met Freddy Urbano, a sociologist in Santiago. In a casual conversation, I mentioned my interest in fences. Freddy surprised me with a paper he once wrote on the role of public and private space in Chilean society. His hypothesis is that Chilean neoliberalism promotes individual participation without involvement in social movements that would gather people together in public spaces. This ten-

dency toward privacy and privatization at social and economic levels removes an essential part of the human condition, which is to interact and think with others. This has led citizens to distrust others and build fences to protect themselves from the dangerous external. Or could it be that delinquency is on the rise and people are tired of being robbed? Ultimately both are connected, like the chicken and the egg.

In either respect, I'd found a brother in common thought. I showed Freddy a Pablo Neruda poem I had been carrying with me, to see if he felt it was connected to our conversation theme.

Here
Land
And land,
Mute land
Blind land
Land without heart
Land without furrows

In other countries bread,
Rice, apples.
In Chile, barbwire fences, barbwire fences...

—Pablo Neruda

Freddy had never seen the poem before and feverishly copied it. It seemed to touch a chord in him also. Even though the poem grows from the notion that mental and physical fences exist in Chile, it rubs against the popular belief that it was Pinochet who provoked the era of distrust. The poem was written long before Pinochet's 1973 *coup d'état*. Whether or not one can pinpoint the historical origin of Chilean distrust may not be crucial to this hypothesis, but in the end I continue to believe a relationship exists between lack of trust and proliferation of fences.

Were Chileans Sold a Raw Deal?

Lower- and middle-class Chileans are working hard to be like gringos. They want the good life, with all the gadgets and technology that come with a prosperous job. Businesses are competitive, the daily pace of life is increasing, and employees are putting in longer hours — including weekends. It's not difficult to notice the toll being taken. Less time for lunch, less time with families, less time to relax during weekends, noticeable bags under the eyes of the weary. But for what? It seems someone has sold Chileans an image of what they should be like. However, I've seen general dissatisfaction in Chile, especially Santiago. People sense they are losing something, but continue to march to the beat of keeping up with the Jones'. They are not seeing direct returns for their efforts.

"We are just a part of the corporate machine," Arturo

Novillo told me one night as we tested our luck on the one-armed bandit at the local casino. He continued, "Most of the major companies in Chile are owned by foreigners," he said, and they are — telephone, energy, public works projects. They are the ones gaining profits — not us."

A complacent, passive attitude is pervasive. Enough so, that the government has taken notice and developed a campaign to combat bad attitudes. Known as the "*piensa*

THE CARTOON--WHEN IT ARRIVES-- WILL GO HERE

To combat a complacent societal attitude, the Chilean government has developed a "think-positive" campaign in an attempt to create public enthusiasm. The campaign is the brunt of many jokes — such as this cartoon: "think positive; you were not the one stepped on."

positiva," or think-positive campaign, billboards and TV commercials promote the virtues of thinking positive — a sort of pep-fest to motivate Chileans. The campaign is now the brunt of jokes and has produced...anti-positive thinking.

Is Everything Beautiful?

Researching a newsletter one day I met a librarian in Santiago from the United States. She had been living in Chile for 20 years and knew I had just arrived in her adopted country. "You've picked the worst country in which to learn Spanish. All I can say is, good luck," she huffed, annoyed by even the *thought* of Chilean Spanish. Two years later, when a Costa Rican woman told me she liked the Chilean accent, I gave her a bit of that same annoyed snarl the librarian gave me.

When other travelers told about me their difficulties with Chilean Spanish, I grinned with satisfaction, thinking that was the reason I didn't speak Spanish fluently. Secretly, I didn't want to face the possibility that I was dense when it came to languages. Combinations of speech elements do make Chilean Spanish challenging, however. Chileans cut off words that end with the letters 's' and 'd', pepper conversations with slang, seemingly eat their words as they speak and accelerate cadence without intonation. Besides these general Chilean characteristics of spoken Spanish, certain geographical regions have further disquieting traits. One such is Chiloé Island, where Chilotes speak with a voice pitch that rises like a rooster crowing, while lips rarely move.³

Overall, certain phrases lose meaning from overuse and

³ Instead of pointing with their hands, Chilotes have the tendency of indicating a direction with their lips. This could be considered a polite gesture — or simply that it's too cold on Chiloé to take your hands out of your pockets.

become torturous to hear. A rosy sunset, a little boy eating ice cream, the arrival of dinner and nearly every shared photo prompts the same reply — “*que lindo*,” or a variety of “*que bueno*” and “*que bonito*.” Meaning, how pretty or how beautiful. These words can be used as affirmation of just about any observation. However distracted I became, I had to remind myself not to translate directly, after all; Latinos are generally more expressive as a society through the use of body language and words.

Despite all this, the political-correctness police have not yet arrived. I used to cringe whenever I heard someone address another as *negrita* (little black one), *flaca* (skinny) and *gordita* (little fat one). Even the famous in Chile have nicknames that would raise an eyebrow in other countries. Chile’s best tennis player goes by the nickname *Chino Rios*, rather than his real name Marcelo, because he looks Chinese. No one seems to mind, including him. In a country without much ethnic diversity, some Chileans have developed phobias about others not like them. Once I asked a friend if she had distant family connections to Polynesia. She immediately begged me to say she didn’t look Asian.

It is also evident the PC police have not arrived when perusing newspaper and magazine cover photos. *La Cuarta* is unmistakable because each day a bikini-clad female adorns the left-hand column of the newspaper’s front page. I usually call this the ‘butt paper’ and wonder what type of pho-



Chilean newspaper, *La Cuarta*, provides a daily infusion of bikinis and street slang for readers who want their news spiced up.

tographer spends every day at the beach sneaking shots of bikini wedgies. *La Cuarta* journalists print language just as colorful as the photos, slang straight from the streets. Some favorites I’ve read are *teclita* (a small piano key, but in this a case reference to elderly women), *manda más* (literally to “rule more,” but used to refer to any high-ranking official) and *más barato que huevos* (cheaper than eggs).

Chilean Fashion Report

Black is back. Whether sporting a T-shirt, jacket, jeans or street shoes, Chileans generally prefer to wear black. Those outside conformity will show an independent streak with red shoes or occasionally plaid pants. Whatever shoe color is selected, women prefer platform shoes that offer a clearer view from higher altitudes. Even though Chilean clothing fashions surrounded me for months, it wasn’t until one day at a concert in Santiago that it caught my attention. I felt consciously different wearing tan pants and a green shirt, compared to the mass of black surrounding me. I didn’t like sticking out in the crowd and eventually replaced my gringo clothes with Chilean counterparts. Nevertheless, even when I was completely clad in Chilean black, my face and gringo stride set me apart from being a local.

A fashionable accessory worn with any clothing is the unavoidable cellular phone. School children, mechanics, housemothers or just about everyone who’s anyone had cell phones — except me. How people survived before cell phones (or the Internet) is unthinkable for those Chileans who flash a glance at their cell phone’s digital screen every five minutes — whether waiting for a call or simply a message that reconfirms they are important. During interviews I would be asked for my cell-phone number and my negative reply would provoke a look of surprise as they realized I was not a member of the “club.” Okay, so maybe I was jealous that no one ever called me halfway through dinner or interrupted a meeting to let me know where the party was that night. I probably missed out on opportunities more than I knew — next time I’ll get one of those buggers right from the beginning.

Would You Like Salt With That Salad?

Don’t worry; your salad has already been seasoned with salt and so has just about all other food in Chile as well. I have written about Chilean food in prior newsletters and won’t cover every dish again. However, some commonalities I’ve found are that the national spices, throughout the country, are salt and mayonnaise. A true Chilean restaurant will not have pepper on the table, just salt, lemon juice and vegetable oil. When ordering a sandwich the phrase, “just a little mayonnaise,” does not exist. Therefore, if you have problems with a hamburger patty floating on a layer of congealed fat you may want to specify your order without mayo — and expect to scrape it off anyway when it arrives.

One frustrating aspect of Chilean food, particularly

in restaurants, is that the potential for rich and diverse meals exists. Unfortunately, few dining establishments capitalize on the availability of fresh seafood, vegetables and fruit. Many local products are used, but are fried, overcooked or diluted in sugar water. One example of the potential for diversity is the Chilean empanada, a crispy half-moon-shaped pastry shell baked or fried with meat or seafood inside. At one empanada kiosk I made the mistake of asking for a vegetable empanada — I was having fantasies of corn, tomatoes and cheese folded inside a piping-hot pastry shell. The attendant reprimanded me, saying that would *not* be a traditional Chilean empanada, of which there are two varieties — baked with bits of beef and fried with seafood (primarily abalone). I left without an empanada, but with a lesson not to meddle with tradition.

One tradition I didn't mess with is the *completo* — basically, a hotdog in a bun topped with every conceivable condiment. I am not one to eat much junk food and it wasn't until my last month in Chile that I tried the infamous *completo*. After a night out dancing with Polet, one of my best Chilean friends, her brother Gabo and two of their cousins (this is key, and one reason why it's difficult for foreigners to be "Chilean"; social groups are tight-knit, based on family ties) we stopped at the local hot dog stand, *Completon*, for a bite. It was morning and the *Completon* was buzzing with customers as if it were lunchtime. Gabo and I, being the men of the group, went in to place the order while the women stayed in the car (another key element in the Chilean experience). We ordered five *completos italianos* (toasted bun with a hot dog and mayo, avocados, spicy garlic sauce and tomatoes smothered on top) and waited at the counter surrounded by rambunctious, half-drunk hungry boys. Returning to the car with our *completos*, I realized no other gringos were in sight. I was with Chileans only, speaking their Spanish, eating their *completos* and I felt — after nearly two years in the country — that I had finally arrived. It was the best hot dog I ever ate, and the Chilean cultural experience I'd been craving.

A Farewell Bade With Admiration and Relief

If such a relationship were possible, I would say I've developed a love/dislike relationship with Chile. Some aspects I will miss greatly and others I don't care to see again. Foremost, it's most difficult to leave friends I've made; especially knowing I may never see some of them again. Also, I will miss the natural beauty and wildness of Chile. The more I explored Chile's wild areas, the more I realized how much more remains. Exploring all these hidden corners of Chile's biodiversity would take a lifetime — as the motto for Chile's Aysen Region proclaims, "Reserve of Life, Don't Contaminate."

Dedication to family and friends is one aspect of Chilean life that I admire. Few are rarely so occupied that they don't have time to stop and chat when they see friends. In my house, anyone dropping by usually led to a tea break and the art of extended conversations. This level of patience

to just hang out and chat was impressive. During many of these idle conversations I picked up new bits and pieces of Spanish-Chilean and otherwise. This led me to wonder how foreigners in the U.S. ever get a chance to learn English; we seem to have little patience with someone learning our language.

Although I am 36 now, I will miss being 28. That's the age that people guessed most often while I was in Chile. A 36-year old without a spouse and/or children was a true novelty for many Chileans. Because of that, I was often asked if I was returning to the States with a Chilean woman — according to most, that's a common gringo trait. Sadly, I disappointed those inquirers, departing with just my backpack and laptop computer.

What I won't miss is the useless bureaucracy in Chilean everyday life. I often wondered whether the first rule of customer service was to reply, "It can't be done and this is why." I have a whole list of examples, but will cite only one. When a tractor-trailer crashed into my truck, as I was ready to board a ferry in southern Chile, I knew instantly that the repair process would delay my travel plans. At fault was the tractor-trailer driver; he worked on contract with *Navimag*, the ferry company.

I asked the shift supervisor if the company could just give me the cash right away to get my truck fixed. He responded, "No, we have to file this with the insurance company. Come back tomorrow and we can start the process, but it will probably take a month to complete."

I returned the next day, but all he did was give me the phone number of the insurance company. The company provided me a list of information I needed — like the truck license plate number and driver's name.

Back to *Navimag* the following day, where the supervisor informed me: "We don't have the truck's plate number because it's already gone. But I'll find out who the driver was."

Meanwhile, time was slipping away and my truck still had a broken window and dented door. I took it to a shop on my own to be fixed.

For the next week I called the insurance company and *Navimag* representatives with no results, except the information that my truck damage was not significant enough to be covered by their insurance policy.

Finally, after enlisting a lawyer and several friends to nag *Navimag* on my behalf, they agreed to reimburse my expenses. However, they would only give me the money after I signed a form that I would not pursue this case anymore. Listed on my waiver form was the truck's license plate number and driver's name.

Also, I won't miss the degree of suspicion among various Chileans I met. On many occasions, when I explained

my work, some would half-jokingly ask if I was a spy with the CIA. What interest any intelligence agency would have in Chilean national parks is beyond me. Moreover, this propensity for conspiracy theories and belief in rumors depressed me from time to time. Among these mystery-seekers, I found a lack of curiosity to explore the truth on their own; they would rather rely on tarot cards, horoscope signs and sensationalistic TV programs.

Luckily, whenever I became overly critical I would meet someone who inspired me — Someone Chileans describe as a person with *buena onda*, a good vibe. Someone like Carlos

Rojas, *el compadre* in Puerto Varas; Pablo Carrasco and his family for adopting me during the holidays, Karin Momberg's music; Carolina Morgado for a constant helping hand; and *thankfully* the list goes on and on. A part of me feels a heaviness that I can't shake off. I owe a great debt to the hundreds of Chileans who helped me — just out of the kindness of their hearts. How can I repay them? A part of me now knows it's best to accept their generosity with a smile and a thank-you — and to repay this debt in the future to those I'll be privileged to help. *Con mucho cariño y un abrazo grande, voy a extrañar a Chile. Un beso a todo el mundo. Chao Chile!* □



At home in Chile with three of my housemates. Sergio Silva on the left and twin sisters Andrea and Bianchi Torres towering beside me. A few of the core members of my Chilean family.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and Their Activities

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farnelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Andrew D. Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the New York Observer and a reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Washington Bureau of Newsday, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for Velvet magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the New Republic and Washington Business Journal before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

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