



International media spotlight on the Amazon roams, but rarely enlightens

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Abstract

The international media has played a powerful role by highlighting problems in the Brazilian Amazon, projecting the views of scientists and activists and projecting data from Brazil's satellite monitoring program to throughout society. Journalists have also told powerful stories about violence and corruption and put pressure on both the Brazilian government and the agribusiness industry. But very few have attempted to explain the forces at work in the Brazilian Amazon today, despite the fact that the drop in deforestation, if sustained, would represent perhaps a singular environmental success story that could have repercussions across the world. If the goal of the media is to seek and promote understanding in the midst of confusion and debate, journalists must engage on a deeper level.

In 2009, the *New York Times* published a story about using carbon payments to halt the conversion of tropical forests into pastures and farms (Rosenthal, 2009). Coming a few months before the climate summit in Copenhagen, the story tapped into the international zeitgeist of the moment, focusing on the question of whether the forestry discussions taking place under the auspices of the United Nations could transform rural economics, preserve rainforests and protect the climate. It was a respectable story, but it said nothing about the progress that Brazil had made in reducing deforestation up to that point – a nearly 54 percent decrease through 2008 – let alone how Brazil had accomplished this success.

The *New York Times* wasn't alone. The international media began poking into forestry issues after the 2007 climate conference in Bali, Indonesia, formally put deforestation on the global climate agenda. Most focused on the high-level policy discussions. Some delved into pilot projects intended to demonstrate the idea – known as REDD, for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation – that forest conservation could be used to mitigate carbon emissions and stave off global warming, all while boosting rural development. Some reports focused on the bottom-line reduction in deforestation, and some maintained the traditional coverage, upping the pressure on government by plumbing the region for stories about bad actors. At my own publication, *Nature*, we focused on the science underlying these discussions, delving into satellite monitoring and efforts to estimate the amount of carbon contained in any given hectare of land (Tollefson, 2009). Despite a flurry of media attention, however, nobody captured the remarkable trends unfolding on the ground in Brazil.

Brazil has curbed deforestation by roughly 75 percent below the 10-year average from 1996–2005 over the past decade and brought industrial-scale land-clearing to a virtual halt (INPE, 2014). This feat is arguably the most significant – and perhaps only – environmental success story of global significance since the Montreal Protocol was signed in 1987, but whether it can be sustained remains an open question. The political winds have shifted: responding to a rural revolt against government enforcement, the Brazilian Congress enacted legislation in 2012, scaling back protections under the country's vaunted Forest Code. Deforestation flared up the following year. And although the rate fell to its second lowest level on record for the season that ended in July 2014, early satellite data indicate a sharp spike in land clearing last August (IMAZON, 2014), indicating that deforestation rates may rise once again in 2015.

The centuries-old conflict over natural resources in the Brazilian Amazon has taken another turn, and what happens next will reverberate across the tropics – and indeed the globe. But little has changed in terms of media coverage, which rarely digs below the surface of the news of the day. What is the role of the media

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when it comes to such complex social and environmental issues? If that role is constrained to reporting the “news”, then we in the media are destined to remain years behind the curve, which means our impact on public policy will be limited. Only now are the scientific, environmental and political communities beginning to digest what has happened in Brazil over the past decade (Nepstad et al., 2014). If the goal is to delve into details and tell a story focused on a particular time and place and people, we may be destined to miss the proverbial forest for the trees. If, on the other hand, the goal is to seek and promote understanding in the midst of confusion and debate, then we in the media need to step up and engage on a wholly different level.

The international media has played its part in promoting conservation by highlighting problems in the Brazilian Amazon, which was until very recently the epicenter of tropical deforestation. It has projected the views of scientists as well as environmental and social watchdog groups. The media told the story of Chico Mendes, whose murder helped put the Amazon on the geopolitical map. It has broadcast messages from superstars such as Sting and Hollywood director James Cameron, helping raise broader public awareness. It has enabled the publicly available data from Brazil’s satellite monitoring program to wash through society and the geopolitical sphere in unpredictable ways. Stories about violence, corruption and corporate responsibility in the era of globalization have put pressure on both the Brazilian government and the agribusiness industry, to marvelous effect. Stories about the new forest carbon economy fueled hope, at least in the early days.

Very few outlets, however, have even attempted to understand the forces at work in the Brazilian Amazon today. The International media, myself included, have focused on the basics: who, what, when, where. What we have missed is the why and the how, and these are precisely the questions that need to be answered if Brazil is to build the kind of political support it will need to truly stabilize and modernize its frontier. These questions are equally important for other tropical countries that are seeking to replicate Brazil’s experience thus far.

The vast majority of media coverage consists of online snippets, which may or may not appear in print internationally. These stories are often tied to reports issued by governments, scientific institutions or civic society organizations and cover any number of themes. This is simply in keeping with the modern media landscape: quick hits in search of more clicks. Woeful economic trends, due in no small part to the rise of the internet and the migration of readers from print to online, have decimated newspaper budgets, leaving fewer reporters with fewer resources. News is transmitted around the globe in a flash, but seldom contains the kind of context that readers would need to understand what is happening on the ground.

In addition to breaking stories, the media landscape is peppered with in-depth reports that are often based on trips into the Amazon. The latter category often results in high-quality journalism, but almost invariably these stories are so focused as to miss the broader trends. In February 2014, for instance, *Smithsonian* published an article titled “Blood in the Jungle” focusing on violence in the Brazilian Amazon (Wallace, 2014). *Harper’s* chimed in with a story about landless settlers in June 2013, titled “Promised Land” (Cheney, 2013). Both homed in on important problems and captured part of the story in glorious color. As a fellow journalist I was more than a little jealous, but I also came away with a feeling that both stories had missed an opportunity to ground these stories in the deeper social and political context.

In both cases, the uninitiated reader would walk away with the impression that powerful people are preying on the weak in the Brazilian Amazon. This is undoubtedly true, and it is a critical message that policymakers, businesses and the general public need to hear. But neither story discussed Brazil’s broader success nor the very real shift in the public dialogue that has accompanied this progress. Both stories missed the larger drama. This is no longer just a local battle being fought among landless poor, indigenous tribes and armed bandits representing a few powerful landowners. Those conflicts still exist, but they take place in a larger conflict featuring a multitude of actors, from governments at all levels, and extending well beyond Brazil’s borders, to consumers around the world and multinational corporations.

To be fair, these are big issues, and geography makes local research a challenge. The Amazon is impossibly large, and far more varied than outsiders would guess. The sheer volume of activity also serves to distract anyone attempting such a feat. The Brazilian Amazon is undoubtedly the most dynamic frontier on Earth, a place where ancient history is clashing with modernity in diverse ways and places. It is at once a hub of modern industrial activity, a source of wealth and food and a bastion of poverty and depravity. The Amazon is a refuge for indigenous societies, including the very last “uncontacted” populations that have declined to join the modern world. It is bustling with migration and occupation, as well as activism and science.

As such, any journalist travelling into the Amazon must define an agenda and live within a budget of time and money. Should the focus be on a tribe that has been impacted by illegal logging? Or a farmer who is faced with the choice of enriching himself or protecting the environment? What about the settlers who are still trying to find a plot of land where they can carve out a simple life? Corrupt politicians, aggressive police, the social impacts of new hydroelectric dams. We pick one topic, usually to the exclusion of the others. The explanation is simple enough: good stories have a dramatic arc and are usually tied to a time and place. Once that arc is defined, the usual space limitations kick in and force journalists like myself to make choices about the kind of information we include – and exclude.

Capturing the essence of an era is an extraordinarily difficult task, which is why such work is generally left to the interminable scholarship of historians. But it has been clear for some time that the events unfolding in the Amazon today are of historical significance. In a growing and increasingly globalized world, this story

extends well beyond Brazil's borders, and in fact well beyond the Amazon's borders. It extends to the global climate as well as well as food production, not to speak of the untold benefits of maintaining a healthy stock of biodiversity for future generations and scientists. With a healthy portfolio of renewable energy as well as plentiful land and sun, this tropical juggernaut is better poised than any other major country to pioneer a path toward truly sustainable development. It is by no means hyperbole to suggest that what happens in Brazil today will help define humanity's relationship with the Earth over the coming century.

There are two first-order questions: How has Brazil actually managed to do what it has done? And can the country hold onto its recent gains, and then make the final push to bring its frontier under control? Answering those raises a host of second-order questions: If we know the basic recipe, can other countries follow the same steps and achieve the same results? If so, where do we start? And what comes next in Brazil? Is the government hiding behind its progress on deforestation while backsliding on other social and environmental issues? Can the country overcome rampant corruption, boost public education and create a modern, regulated economy? What does sustainable development really look like?

Based on my own experience, including more than three months on the ground in Brazil last year, mostly in the Amazon, I know all too well that these are difficult questions. All too often, we talk about deforestation as if it were purely an environmental issue, relying on activists and scientists for our information. News stories about the Forest Code debate typically pitted farmers and ranchers against environmentalists, but I discovered a full spectrum of opinions talking to soybean farmers in Mato Grosso, ranchers and settlers in Pará, rubber tappers in Acre and government officials at all levels. Everybody had their own story and their own struggles, and opinions differed widely as to what should come next. Rarely was their answer as black and white as the issue is often portrayed, but this is precisely why it is incumbent upon journalists to talk to more people and tell more stories.

There are things we can say about how Brazil has achieved as much as it has thus far. We know that the first steps are data and transparency. Scientists have been busy developing satellite-monitoring tools that will give governments across the tropics the information they need to begin. And it is hard to imagine that Brazil would have made as much progress as it has if the government had kept the data to itself. That singular decision allows scientists to verify the data, environmentalists to exploit the data, and industry to use the data in developing its own solutions. Indeed, today most accept that the reduction in deforestation is due to a combination of forces, including favorable economics in the early years and a suite of government policies combined with heavy pressure from environmentalists on major international exporters of beef and soy. Environmentalists are already working to transfer the latter model to Indonesia.

It seems unlikely that the situation would deteriorate to where it was 10–15 years ago, simply because the political consequences of a serious backslide, both for Brazilian government officials and agribusiness interests that control much of the economy, are too heavy. Recent research suggests that landowners who are covered by the voluntary soybean and beef moratoria have indeed changed their behavior in order to meet industry standards and get their products onto the market (Gibbs et al., 2015, 2014). Business as usual has changed, but it is also clear that further progress will be difficult indeed.

Although large landowners likely still play a role (Godar et al., 2014), what Brazil is left with today is mostly smaller-scale deforestation that is harder to control. The research cited above showed that some cattle ranchers have complied in areas where they are raising cattle while clearing forest illegally in other areas in order to plant other crops that are not covered by the moratoria. This raises questions about how well Brazil will be able to police small-scale deforestation going forward under the new Forest Code. Roughly 30 percent of the deforestation last year occurred in rural settlements, where poor landowners with little education are simply eking out a living. And land-grabbing continues, particularly in public forests that have yet to be formally designated. In some cases deforestation is carried out by outright criminals who are peddling land on the black market. State and federal authorities broke up one such crime ring in Novo Progresso last year, and then wound up on a six-month manhunt before arresting the ringleader in an apartment in Sao Paulo.

In all of these cases, we are talking about people who do not fear the current enforcement regime, which relies on a mixture of markets and mostly paper penalties. Landowners who are charged rarely go to jail or pay fines, although the money paid to attorneys who keep cases indefinitely tied up in court serves as a kind of tax on those who are caught breaking the law. The poor will continue to clear land as necessary to make a living. The land-grabbers will continue to grab land until the government makes it clear that no more land-grabbing will be allowed. And the greedy, who think they can make more money by flaunting the law rather than abiding it, will do so as long as they are able.

At the same time, the pressure for development, and likely the value of open land, is only going to rise in the years and decades to come. The Brazilian government is aggressively pushing for more dams, better roads and bigger ports, all of which will only increase pressure on the remaining forest. As the global population rises, so, too, will demand for land and food. And even if mankind's seemingly endless onslaught on the forest is contained, the threat of climate change itself remains.

But the challenge is clear enough: Brazil needs to figure out how to promote rural development that does not depend on an endless expansion of the human frontier, which is of course what the UN forestry agenda was intended to do. In many ways, Brazil has come full circle, only to find itself where everybody thought

we were beginning. Perhaps REDD investments can be used to help create a series of positive incentives that will encourage landowners, along with local and state governments, to do pursue legal operations in a modern and fully regulated industry. The state of Acre, for instance, is already pioneering a suite of unique public-private partnerships that are designed to promote green jobs and clean development. Globalization can play its part, too, if the agricultural industry maintains and expands on the environmental standards that are now in place in many areas. With a little success under its belt, perhaps future governments can negotiate a compromise among developers, producers, indigenous tribes and the broader citizenry to whom many of these resources belong.

This is not an easy agenda for journalists. Social, economic and environmental trends in the Brazilian Amazon today are complex, confusing and often contradictory. Reasonable people can and often do look at the same information and come to opposing conclusions. This is to be expected, but it makes the job of foreign reporters who are lucky to get a week on the ground all the more difficult. I've been trying to keep an eye on this story for years, and thus far have only captured pieces of it in occasional stories in my own publications. Perhaps Brazilian journalists who are more familiar with these complexities can help by working with international media more frequently. Maybe it's up to the international media to put in more time and find better ways of telling the story. Likely we'll need to do both. But however difficult, this is the real story, and it has yet to be told to an international audience.

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Competing interests

None

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