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## **AMAZON'S DIGITAL LOCAL MEDIA COVERAGE ON LARGE DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS WITH SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT**

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### **1. Introduction**

Brazil holds a major geopolitical responsibility in international environmental decisions. However, contrary to environmental preservation, large development projects linked to the agricultural and mining sectors (Ritter et al., 2017) and controversial due to their socio-environmental impacts (Antonaccio, 2022) are defended by political advocates of developmentalism (Fonseca, 2014). Indeed, the debate surrounding extractivism and infrastructure projects worldwide has been historically marked by opposing narratives: the promotion of these projects as economic drivers versus critiques highlighting their socio-environmental risks (Walton & Boon, 2014; Lyytimäki et al., 2021; Yin, 2024).

In the Amazon region, where most of these projects are concentrated, local media has

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often been used as a propaganda platform by influential regional actors (Peruzzo, 2005; Aguiar, 2016). Although studies in the EU and the U.S. highlight community, commitment, and continuity as pillars of digital local journalism (Gulyas & Hess, 2024) and emphasize that it breaks from the elitist orientation of mainstream media (Sjøvaag, 2018; Mathisen, 2023), the Brazilian case seems to diverge.

In fact, local media has the potential to amplify voices often overlooked by national coverage, yet structural and financial challenges undermine its independence and quality (Amaral, 2012; Nielsen, 2015; Mota, 2023). Resource scarcity and overburdened professionals have intensified churnalism, favoring the reproduction of content from press offices and PR agencies (Boumans et al., 2018; Guenther, Schröder & Tratter, 2024). The study and practice of local journalism requires an understanding of place-based context, alongside wider social, cultural, political and economic factors that shape the sector (Gulyas & Hess, 2024). In Brazil, political influence on media is facilitated by the limited journalistic coverage in these areas, both in quantity and quality (Netlab, 2022; Mota, 2023), resulting in biased reporting and omission of facts (Peruzzo, 2005).

The fragility of local media limits its role in both informing and fostering diverse voices. The lack of diversity in journalism is described as blind spots, media shadows (Nord & Nygren, 2022), or news deserts (Napoli, 2018), reflecting geographical, thematic, or social gaps. The framing of news highlights (or omits) certain aspects of reality to shape public perception and influence policy responses, playing a pivotal role in environmental issues (Entman, 1993; Lewandowsky, 2021). Studies show that local coverage in Brazil is often dominated by agribusiness interests, sidelining environmental agendas and institutionalizing conflicts between these sectors (Duchiade, 2024; Girardi et al., 2012; Santos et al., 2024; Netlab, 2022). This alignment not only further weakens the media ecosystem but also contributes to the dismantling of environmental protection.

Against this backdrop, this research investigates how local media outlets in the Amazon report on four large development projects with socio-environmental impacts: (i) the resurfacing of the BR-319 highway; (ii) the construction of the Ferrogrão railway; (iii) oil well drilling at the mouth of the Amazon River; and (iv) potassium exploration on Indigenous lands. By analyzing news content, actors' representation, reproduction, and mentions of geographical scales, this paper aims to investigate how local media in the Amazon frame large development projects with socio-environmental impacts to examine the dominance of economic-driven narratives, the prominence of specific actors and how geographical scales influence the framing of their coverage.

## **2. Data and methods**

To track media coverage of these four projects, we relied on our continuous monitoring of 280 local media websites in the Amazon. Data collection was conducted with customized crawlers, which automated the extraction of news articles (Zhao, 2017). We then performed searches using terms related to the projects to filter the dataset and identify project mentions between January 1, 2023, and March 31, 2024.

We conducted a systematic content analysis of 3,555 articles published by 186 of the

280 monitored media outlets, evaluating their positioning on the projects and identifying

mentions of key actors. We also analyzed the geographical scales – local, regional, national, or global – of socio-environmental impacts, building upon Nyberg, Wright & Kirk (2018). During the manual analysis, we looked for signs of content reproduction and identified the original sources of the reproduced articles.

### **3. Findings and contribution**

The findings show that local media predominantly supports large development projects. Supportive articles emphasize economic growth and national development, while critics focus on local impacts. While the international scale was introduced through climate concerns, it appeared less frequently in the coverage compared to other scales. Potassium extraction is mainly linked to indigenous community impacts, while oil extraction is discussed in terms of global environmental consequences. In the case of BR-319, regional impacts, particularly state connections and mobility implications, are most emphasized. The Ferrogrão project coverage touches on all scales—local, national, and international—due to its direct link to agribusiness expansion and economic impact. Our analysis, like Nyberg et al. (2018), shows how different geographical scales are used to mobilize support or resistance to the projects in local media.

Among the actors, local politicians, business leaders, and agribusiness entities were the primary advocates for the projects, while researchers, environmental NGOs, government agencies, and affected communities were less frequently mentioned, often receiving less attention or argumentative weight. This contradicts the "community" element that local journalism should uphold (Gulyas & Hess, 2024), as it underrepresents and neglects the affected communities. It also shows that local media often overshadow critical voices, limiting public debate and diversity on the socio-environmental impacts of the projects. This reflects studies showing that journalists tend to favor powerful and elite sources, thus reflecting their perspectives (Berkowitz, 2019; Sjøvaag, 2018; Yin, 2024).

Both supportive and critical articles highlighted the federal government's ambiguous stance, showcasing divisions between key figures like President Lula and Ministries of the Environment, Transport and of Agriculture and Livestock. This political duality was reflected in the coverage, often framing internal government tensions as a debate over development visions, without fully addressing the socio-environmental impacts of the projects.

The research found that 65.2% of the content was republished from other sites, primarily news agency articles, highlighting these sources' central role in shaping media coverage. The prevalence of declaratory journalism, churnalism, and pink-slime journalism reflects the region's journalistic deterioration and heavy reliance on third-party content (Welbers et al., 2016; Lyytimäki et al., 2021; Anderson-Davis, 2024; Brown, 2024). Despite increasing efforts to promote local media outlets focused on socio-environmental issues (Duchiade, 2024), the current reliance of online local journalism on national agency content weakens engagement with local knowledge and

context (Gulyas & Hess, 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2022).

The study shows that the mere presence of a media outlet in a territory does not guarantee proximity to its audiences (Mota, 2023; Jerónimo, Correia & Gradim, 2020). It also reveals how coverage patterns prioritize certain arguments and geographical scales, reinforcing the dominance of economic sectors in local media discourse. The limited number of news connecting local impacts to global issues, such as climate change and deforestation, underscores the media's difficulty in contextualizing the broader implications of the projects. This highlights the need for a critical examination of media dynamics in the Amazon, particularly in the digital sphere, where large-scale content replication can amplify dominant narratives while sidelining dissenting voices. By exposing patterns of content reproduction, institutional source dependency, and framings that align with political and economic interests, the study contributes to understanding local media vulnerabilities and the challenges of fostering a more independent and robust environmental journalism online.

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