

Against Documents

Traceability, Corruptive Mediality, and the
Remaking of Environmental Accounting in
Tropical Timber Supply Chains



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Abstract

At a time when unsanctioned land use change and forest destruction have become sources of planetary anxiety and anthropocenic guilt, the governance of deforestation-linked supply chains is emerging as a key transnational site of experimentation in environmental accounting, epistemic authority, and moral accountability. Central to this space is the proliferation of novel traceability regulations—the mechanisms through which the origin of a commodity is established — and the ways these regulations increasingly rely on new media architectures, modes of accountability, and aesthetics of verification to define what counts as legal and sustainable.

In this presentation, I examine a pervasive formulation in the grey literature on deforestation-linked supply chains: the claim that traceable sourcing requires a transition from “document-based” to “fact-based” modes of reckoning. Focusing on the evolving media infrastructures that have shaped the governance of tropical timber supply chains over the past twenty-five years, I explore the epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical implications of this idealized transition. I argue that traceability regulations rework narratives of immediacy and objectivity by recasting earlier documentary regimes as retrospectively corruptible forms of mediation. This reconfiguration, I show, unsettles the infrastructural media foundations of twentieth-century international trade regulation and brings into view a more unstable terrain of state–corporate dependencies, standardized global aesthetics, and contested authority.

In tracing these shifts, the presentation attends to the subtle media-ideological transformations that undergird the governance of contemporary deforestation-linked supply chains. It argues that as traceability systems take on the form of mundane platforms for planetary accounting and accountability, they redistribute enduring questions of responsibility, truth, and corruptibility across new assemblages of data, expertise, and power.




Eduardo Romero Dianderas is an Assistant Professor at the Institute for the Study of International Development and an Associate Member of the Department of Anthropology at McGill University. He holds a PhD in Sociocultural Anthropology from Columbia University (2022) and specializes in the study of media technologies, technical infrastructures, and global environmental governance in Latin America.

His upcoming book, *Calculating Amazonia: quantifying tropical life in the age of climate change and biodiversity loss* (under contract with Duke University Press), examines how technical knowledge about Peru's Amazonian rainforests is being transformed in the context of the global environmental crisis. Drawing on 24 months of intensive ethnographic and archival fieldwork and 15 years of experience conducting research in Peru's Amazonian rainforests, *Calculating Amazonia* traces how different practices and objects of technical calculation become unexpected terrains of political struggle at a time when standardized calculative procedures, digital innovations and legal reforms are changing the conditions upon which tropical rainforest governance is conducted at different scales.

Eduardo's research has been supported by the US National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Social Science Research Council, and the Explorer's Club. His research has been published in *American Ethnologist*, *Development*, *Tapuya*, *Environment & Society*, and *Cultural Anthropology*.



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