

Keeping CNN Honest: 10 Ways Anderson Cooper Got the Rail Story Wrong

by Tanya Snyder January 31, 2013

Last Friday, CNN's Anderson Cooper ran a segment about high-speed rail as part of his "Keeping Them Honest" series. Reporter Drew Griffin did an "exposé" of a Vermont rail project that spent .00006 percent of the federal stimulus money on needed track improvements and came in on time and under budget. Scandal!

It amounts to a high-profile smear campaign on the high-speed rail program from a mainstream media source trying to expose government corruption and waste where none exists. Cooper makes it clear they're going to stay on the story; they already did a similar takedown of the California rail program.

I've counted ten ways this story was misreported. Let me know in the comments if I've missed any...

1. Higher-speed rail is not a failure. Perhaps the Obama administration could have done a better job making clear that their rail program was split into two halves: one for high-speed rail and one for incremental upgrades to inter-city passenger rail. Not all of the projects were intended to bring speeds up to 110 mph.

"We've never been very public about this but, yes, we've felt for a long time that the administration has done a poor job around messaging," said Dan Schned of the Regional Plan Association. "The bulk of the money went to regional projects, but they still had the secretary going around the country and calling this the 'high-speed program.'"

The crux of the CNN story is that while the Vermont project did everything it set out to do and was a responsible steward of taxpayer money, it's not "the high-speed rail that you or I think of." Well, no. There's a reason for that.

2. It takes more than three years to build high-speed rail. Cooper embarrassed himself when he ominously intoned that three whole years after the passage of the stimulus (actually, it's been four years), "we can't find any high-speed rail that's actually been built." They show images of almond trees and dairy farms in California along the planned route. "Not a single piece of track on that line has been built."

True – they plan to break ground this summer in California. But, as House Republicans constantly complain, highway projects can take up to 15 years to complete. There are lots of reasons for that, which I won't delve into here. But to expect something as massive and complex as high-speed rail to instantly appear like magic the minute the deal is inked is, well, a little naïve. Federal Railroad Administration Chief Joe Szabo calls high-speed rail "a multi-generational effort," noting that it took "10 administrations, 28 sessions of Congress" to complete the interstate highway system.

3. There is high-speed rail. Cooper says they couldn't find any high-speed rail. I guess he wasn't looking in the Midwest, where officials just cut the ribbon on new service between Chicago and Kalamazoo. It's the second fastest line in the country, nearing Acela speeds of 150 mph. Other trains in the Midwest can reach 110 mph in places.

And that fits the U.S. DOT's definition of high-speed rail. In 2009, the agency made clear that they defined high-speed rail as "reasonably expected to reach speeds of at least 110 mph." That's not the Japanese definition or the French definition, but it's what DOT committed to, and it's happening.

And even slower speeds like the Vermonter's will build the travel market, which will then justify greater investment in higher speeds and enhanced reliability. Amtrak is joining California in buying high-speed rolling stock – clearly they're preparing for a faster future.

Drew Griffin embarrassed himself by revealing how little he understands transportation.

4. \$52 million isn't enough to turn around decades of neglect. The improvements made on the Vermont segment that was singled out by CNN can be helpful as part of a reinvigorated rail network — but that network still has a long way to go. "Instead of complaining about this, they should be demanding more money spent," said Andy Kunz, president of the U.S. High-Speed Rail Association. "We've let rail fall apart in this country to such a state that there are a lot of basic repairs that are needed as well."

CNN's Griffin criticized the line for its infrequency — there are only one or two trains a day — and its slowness — one passenger Griffin interviewed said it takes nine hours to get to New York, versus five-and-a-half hours driving. That's right, Kunz readily admits: Rail in the U.S. is substandard.

“It's the 21st century, we're a top country in the world — why do we have such crappy rail service?” Kunz said. “It's because we have never invested in rail in this country in 100 years.”

5. We're still waiting for the CNN expose about the \$4.7 billion highway to nowhere. The interstate system has been the beneficiary of more than \$600 billion in public subsidies over and above what it rakes in from fuel taxes and tolls. Spending on highways and aviation dwarf what that nation spends on rail, and people still suffer through the frustration of congestion and delays on those modes. What if we started pouring equal amounts of cash into inter-city rail? America could have a state-of-the-art system in no time.

The Vermont Agency of Transportation spent most of its \$241.2 million in stimulus money on roads. The \$52 million to make some basic efficiency upgrades to its Amtrak line — which resulted in substantial time savings — doesn't seem like an inordinate amount. And it's a drop in the bucket compared to the real sources of waste in American transportation spending, like Alabama's \$4.7 billion zombie highway.

6. The only criterion was an environmental impact statement? Wrong. Griffin interviewed just one “independent” source, and it's railophobe Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute. O'Toole looks at the camera and tells this bald-faced lie: “The federal government had one criteria when it was passing out high-speed rail funds, and that was, ‘Had states done an environmental impact statement, so the projects would be shovel-ready’ ... It didn't matter whether the project was worthwhile.”

That's just “flatly incorrect,” said Dan Schned.

Actually, a GAO report two years ago praised the FRA for following recommended project selection practices with its high-speed rail grants. Schned notes that while RPA had recommended a highly quantitative model, the FRA's selection process was more qualitative, but it's still just a load of hooey to say shovel-readiness was the only thing they looked at. After all, the program was oversubscribed by a factor of 10 to 1. The FRA clearly didn't just take everyone with an EIS.

7. Griffin's assertion that the project “only” saved 28 minutes is misleading — in three ways. First, it's just sloppy reporting that CNN fails to put the 28-minute time savings in the context of the total trip. Is

that shaved off a two-hour trip or a 20-hour trip? The FRA finally cleared it up for me: Turns out he's talking about a 28 minutes savings on a trip that used to take 4 hours and 45 minutes. That's about a 10 percent time savings – not too shabby.

Second, it's worth noting that taxpayers routinely shell out billions to save commuters mere minutes – seconds, even – on the roadways. So 28 minutes is actually a rather substantial amount of time to save for just \$52 million.

Third, stimulus-funded rail projects along the Vermonter line will, when completed, result in a time savings of nearly 70 minutes between New Haven, Connecticut, and St. Albans, Vermont, according to the FRA. That's currently an eight-hour train trip.

Here's the breakdown: In Connecticut, improved track and signaling will bring speeds up to 79 mph, saving 10 minutes and, more significantly, increasing capacity. In Massachusetts, they'll improve track and create a more direct route between East Northfield and Springfield, eliminating the need to change direction, for a savings of 28 to 30 minutes. And in Vermont, they improved 190 miles of track and upgraded the signal system on 16 miles south of White River Junction, to save another 28 to 30 minutes in travel time.

There's the missing context for those 28 minutes.

8. Of course extending the line to Montréal would boost ridership. Griffin comes across as a know-nothing when he derides the idea that reconnecting Montréal to the Vermonter line will “somehow or another” increase travel along the line.

“It is absurd to imply that extending the train north to a major destination like Montréal would not produce a big ridership increase,” said Ross Capon, president of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, in a statement. Szabo agrees: “Connecting in a major urban area like Montréal is significant and will exponentially grow ridership.”

The Vermont Department of Transportation projects the extension would generate between 78,000 and 120,000 additional riders annually on the line – roughly doubling the existing ridership.

A Canadian diplomat once blogged about his 11-hour journey between New York City and Montréal – a journey that an Amtrak agent told him could have easily been two hours shorter with “pre-border clearance, upgrading speed, eliminating a stop at Yonkers, a dedicated track on Canadian Pacific line north of Rouses Point and no engine change at Albany.” Basic improvements like this – which still don’t bring the trains up to “the high-speed rail you or I think about” — could easily make the scenic trip fast enough to compete with car travel.

9. Ridership is growing. Griffin acknowledges that ridership in Vermont is up. Amtrak ridership all over the country is up, in fact – by 49 percent over 2000. More people are choosing rail – and that’s with a decrepit, slow, unreliable system. Imagine how people would flock to trains if they were fast, elegant, and on time.

10. Vermont is a reasonable place to improve rail. Cooper and Griffin made it sound like Vermont – “a state with no big cities and little congestion” — is a bad place for rail to even exist. Indeed, it’s a strange place to highlight when you’re doing a news segment about high-speed rail, when the bigger story is what’s going on in California, the Northeast Corridor, the Midwest, and Texas.

But Vermont is a perfectly natural place for rail, and the stimulus-funded improvements didn’t just save travelers time, they enhanced reliability and safety, too. Additionally, short line railroads will be able to haul heavier loads, taking more trucks off the highways and reducing congestion.

“It is likely, at least in the medium term, what I would classify as feeder service,” Szabo told me. “And that doesn’t mean it’s unimportant; in fact it’s a very important part of a network. But it’s about feeding those smaller communities in New England to the Northeast Corridor spine. It’s the level of connectivity that builds up synergy.”

It’s not just Vermont – rail is growing throughout New England. In November, Amtrak extended service north of Portland, Maine, to Freeport and Brunswick, opening to great fanfare in those communities. The service has exceeded projected ridership and sparked new development near the stations.