



CNN's Vermont rail story went way on the wrong track

By: Jon Margolis - January 31, 2013

Thanks to CNN, Vermont got a journalism lesson this week as the cable network devoted eight minutes and 38 seconds to a special report on the state's stimulus-funded rail improvement project, one of the regular "keeping them honest" features on the "Anderson Cooper 360" program.

Alas, it was a very bad journalism lesson because it was very bad journalism presented by people apparently unaware of the irony of claiming to be "keeping them honest" dishonestly.

Which is not to say that its point of view was incorrect. Points of view may be wise or unwise, but almost by definition they are not incorrect. The segment's bias was obvious, but biased journalism can be defended. Its advocates prefer to call it "advocacy journalism," and there is a place for it.

CNN has not generally been considered one of those places, but that's the network's business. If it wants to undertake an ideological crusade – in this case arguing that the \$10 billion spent nationally (about \$52 million in Vermont) to improve passenger rail service is a boondoggle – more power to it. In this case, a responsible, accurate, honest report might have been persuasive. But a responsible, accurate, honest report was nowhere to be found.

As a public service, then, and because they obviously need it, herewith a basic primer in journalistic practice and ethics for Cooper, investigative reporter Drew Griffin, and their bosses:

Lesson 1 – No cheap shots. Reporting from the Essex Junction Amtrak station, which he called "the busiest station in all of Vermont," (which it may not be), Griffin noted that "11 people got off (and) no one got on."

Well of course no one got on. That train just chugs a few miles up to St. Albans where it spends the night. Nobody takes the train from Essex to St. Albans. If Griffin knew that he was being devious. And he had no excuse not knowing it.

In fact, almost nobody takes the train from any Vermont station to another. Vermonters take the train to New York. So Griffin's "revelation" that the project chopped only 28 minutes off the train's voyage through the state was another cheap shot. If CNN had chosen to report out the entire story (see below), it would have figured out that the work is likely to save two hours for travelers heading to New York.

Lesson 2 – Don't be cute. There is Griffin standing on the trainless track. "I could stand here all day long," he says. "I could jog on the tracks," and there he is, jogging on the tracks, and standing there as the sun set, still without seeing a train.

Forget for a moment that jogging along the tracks is illegal (criminal trespass) and dangerously stupid, thus prompting Joyce Rose, the president of Operation Lifesaver, to send Griffin a sharply worded letter reminding him that “more people are killed each year trespassing on train tracks than in vehicle-train collisions at crossings.”

More to the point here is that the rail improvement project neither envisioned nor promised oodles of trains. Its purpose was to improve the tracks so both passenger and freight trains could go faster and haul heavier loads.

Lesson 3 – Put all dollar figures in context. Yes, \$52 million sounds like a lot of money. The average guy could probably live on it for a year or two. But just providing the figure and leaving it out there is meaningless.

Minimal context would note that the U.S. government spends some \$69.5 billion a year on transportation, or more than six times the entire nationwide stimulus-financed rail improvement project, more than 100 times Vermont’s share. More than half of all those federal expenditures, about \$41.5 billion, is spent on highways. Does this prove that the \$52 million was money well spent? Not at all. But it is essential information.

Lesson 4 – Provide at least a little balance. To answer why this little state got all that federal money, Griffin relied on one authority, policy analyst Randal O’Toole. Properly, Griffin said O’Toole was associated with the “libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.” He did not point out that O’Toole has also been associated with the Thoreau Institute, which has been funded over the years by foundations with close ties to the petroleum industry.

O’Toole began inauspiciously. The Vermont project got the money, he said, because, “the federal government has one criteria when it comes to handing out high speed rail funds. And that was, had states done an environmental impact statement so they were shovel ready.”

There is no such thing as “one criteria.” There can be two criteria or 20 million. One of them is a criterion.

And according to some people, including Vermont Agency of Transportation Secretary Brian Searles, the state had to satisfy several of them before federal authorities approved the grant in an intensely competitive process.

“The real reason that we qualified was that it was one of the eight designated corridors in the country,” Searle said.

It’s entirely possible that O’Toole’s explanation would withstand scrutiny better than Searles’. What real journalists do in these cases, though, is talk to folks on both sides, then apply the scrutiny. It wasn’t as though Searles was unavailable. He said he “had extensive conversations (with CNN staff) over time and on that day. They came here with an agenda to attack the high speed rail program.”

Lesson 5 – Tell the whole story. Had Griffin put Searles on camera, he might have explained that the Vermont work did not stand alone. It was part of a regional project which included rail improvements in Massachusetts and Connecticut. That explains the projected two-hour reduction in the Vermont-to-New York trip.

But this project is not really limited to the U.S. Both the province of Quebec and the Canadian government are improving their rail lines in coordination with the U.S. effort. Both countries believe they have a significant economic interest in better rail links between the Montreal area, home to some 3.9 million people, and U.S. destinations.

Nor is it just passengers. The rail line improvements mean heavier loads can go over the bridges and overpasses. When completed, it will ease freight transportation between Montreal and the Connecticut shipping ports on the north shore of Long Island Sound. The potential economic development impact for the entire region could be substantial.

That's why New England Central Railroad put up the state's \$18 million match for the project. Griffin did note that a private firm put up the money. He didn't mention that it had a vested interest in doing so, meaning the possible economic impact here is far greater than cutting a couple of hours off the trip to Penn Station.

Jerry Vest, the vice president for governmental and industrial affairs for the Genesee and Wyoming, Inc., which now owns New England Central, said the rail improvement "will be a big plus for Vermont," making it easier for the state to attract new business.

"Freight rail is undergoing a renaissance, Vest said, "and companies want to have access to high-quality rail service."

Does this make the \$52 million –plus some \$140 million in the other states – worthwhile? Like any public policy decision, that's open to debate. What is not open to debate is that it all should have been in the story.

In fairness to CNN, Griffin did acknowledge that the Vermont share of the work came in "on time and on budget," and that it created some jobs. More specifically, Searles said (but CNN did not) it created 246 direct jobs and another 319 "indirect and induced." Most of them were temporary jobs, but at the peak of the recession, even temporary jobs were useful, both to the people who got them and to the regional economy.

The CNN report did make one good point: at least in New England, these "high speed" rail projects will not bring real high-speed rail as found in Europe and Japan. Vermont's stations are too close to one another, and the state wants to provide service to all those towns. Even Ross Capon, the head of the National Association of Railroad Passengers, agreed that the Obama administration was guilty of "hyperbole" in selling its program.

But that was the segment's only valid point, which perhaps explains why Griffin and Cooper, in their post-tape chit-chat, kept belaboring it, thereby violating the immortal advice to writers from professor Lee Youngdahl: "Once something has been said, it no longer has to be said."

But one more thing has to be said here. Every news story about public funding of transportation should remember – and should explain – that all forms of transportation are and always have been publicly subsidized. The Founders put it right in the Constitution, authorizing Congress to establish a system of "Post roads." As America gets bigger and richer, more people will be doing more traveling. The alternatives to better rail service are more highways and/or more airports, all of which are expensive and all of which will be subsidized.

And both of which will put more goop in the air than trains do.

That has to be part of the story, too. Until CNN figures that out, others will have to keep them honest.