

## **A Train to Nowhere?**

### **California Editorial coverage of the California High-Speed Rail System**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The California High-Speed rail system has been a highly contentious issue, particularly in the context of sweeping political and economic changes since its initial proposal in 2002. Given the controversial nature, editorials represent an excellent measure of public opinion and concerns. Little has been done however to critically analyze these editorials. This thesis examines how newspapers editorial have used discursive techniques to represent and promote differing opinions and agendas. I performed a Critical Discourse Analysis focused on the discursive elements and argument frames of editorials. I also analyzed these editorials over time to detect changes in discourse and frames from the rails initial conception in 2002 to its first phase of construction in 2013. I found that the authors primarily framed their arguments by focusing on either fiscal costs or multiple benefits. I also found that the discourse tended to omit facts and figures when it would hurt their argument. Many editorials focused on the real dollar cost of the high-speed rail and frequently cited what the cost of construction at the time of the article would be. This is in direct contrast to the other dominant frame that championed the multiple benefits of the high-speed rail like job creation, environmental benefits, future benefits, etc. without citing any actual facts or numbers. This type of discourse analysis using editorials and letters to the editor offers a unique way to view the issues that newspaper readers feel is the most important and as such should be considered first and foremost.

#### **KEYWORDS**

critical discourse analysis (CDA), newspapers, politics, editorials, Letters to the Editor

## INTRODUCTION

Following similar developments in Europe and Asia, the United States began to consider the possibility of a High Speed Rail system connecting the East and West Coast. With this in mind, the California Legislature began to debate a future High Speed Rail system as early as 1980 (Chen and Zhang, 2010). It was not until 2002 with the passage of SB 1856, the “Safe, Reliable, High-Speed Passenger Train Bond Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” (Costa et al 2002) that California finally established some semblance of a policy. The idea of a High Speed Rail System would eventually make it out of the legislature and appear before California voters as Proposition 1A in 2008 (Office of CA Secretary of State, 2008). Passed by 52.6% of the voters, California voted to take on a major infrastructure project the likes of which had not been seen before. The 52.6% yes vote signaled a shift in public opinion that favored the High Speed Rail Bond to pass roughly 60% to 40% in 2003 (Baldassare, 2003). Shortly thereafter, the economic recession of 2008 was fully realized. When voters took to the polls in 2008, the projected cost of the High Speed Rail system was \$33 Billion. By 2011, that number billowed to \$65.4 Billion, and Californians grew increasingly worried (Railway Gazette International, 2011). In light of many ongoing changes in estimated costs, laws, and public opinion, California newspapers have played a critical role in conveying changes in information and policy.

Given the controversy surrounding the California High Speed Rail (CAHSR) system, newspapers, magazines, television newscasts play an integral part in keeping the public informed. A recent study of discourse in Iceland concerning legal proceedings, document, and newspaper articles showed the importance of media in the formulation of policy and how it can inform the general public (Jóhannesson, 2007). Another study found that in online discussion, commentators cited newspaper articles more than other sources (O’Connor, Rapchak, 2012). An analysis of mass media between 1988-2004 has shown that media in general has become increasingly less information based and more opinion based (Boykoff and Boykoff, 2007) while another study noted that print media between 2003 and 2006 seemed to diverge from the scientific consensus with a sharp decline in the later years (Boykoff, 2007). As noted above, there are significant trends for informal discourse like Internet blog postings and formal discourse for newspaper articles and mass media coverage. There is a gap in research then for semi-formal discourse such as editorials and letters to the editor.

I performed a critical discourse analysis of newspaper editorials on the CAHSR system, paying particular attention to the framing and discursive techniques they use. In short, I was looking to answer 1) what the primary frame utilized was, 2) how it changed across time and 3) how these articles appeared across California.

## METHODS

### Study system

I analyzed 86 newspaper editorials from newspapers across California between September 2002 and today. This vast time period was further broken down into 3 periods from January 2002-November 4, 2008, November 5, 2008-December 31, 2011, and from January 2012 until present. These time periods correspond with significant changes in policy and process of the California High Speed Rail. In early 2002, the first pieces of legislation regarding high-speed rail construction began to form. This legislative phase is the largest as the proposition wouldn't be placed on the ballot until 2008. November 4, 2008 was chosen because it was the day that Proposition 1A was voted on and passed. January 1, 2012 represents the transition from planning into construction of the high-speed rail. Using LexisNexis archives, a search of "California High Speed Rail" in newspapers yielded upwards of 1000 results. After using this initial search term, I clicked on the Subject tab and selected Editorials and Opinions, which yielded around 130 results. Some minor grooming was required at this point as some editorials were either 1) outside of the time frames, 2) not from California Newspapers, or 3) were repeated and reprinted in other newspapers.

### Discourse Analysis

To analyze editorials, I largely followed the methods used by Huckin (1997) and Gamson and Modigliani (1989). I began by reading the text through once in a non-critical way focusing on simply understanding what the article was communicating. This was similar to a casual read of a newspaper or magazine article. I then performed a second read through, this time focusing

on the details of the editorial. What follows is the details of the study along with how Huckin defined them.

**Table 1. Discursive Technique and Definition.** Taken from “Functional Approaches to Written Text: Classroom Applications: Critical Discourse Analysis” by Thomas Huckin, 1997.

<b>Discursive Technique</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Framing	<i>“Framing refers to how the content of a text is presented, what sort of perspective (angle, slant) the writer is taking.”</i>
Omission	<i>“Omission is often the most potent aspect of textualization, because if the write does not mention something, it often does not even enter the reader’s mind and thus is not subjected to his or her scrutiny.”</i>
Connotation	<i>“Connotations derive from the frequent use of a word or phrase in a particular type of context.”</i>
Register	<i>“Register refers to a text’s level of formality or informality, its degree of technicality, its subject field, etc.”</i>
Modality	<i>“Modality refers to the tone of statements as regards their degree of certitude and authority.”</i>

Using these five details, I reread every article multiple times and logged each in a separate document containing notes. This completed by critical discourse analysis of the articles.

### **Frame Analysis**

While performing the Discourse Analysis, I placed these editorials into larger categories of frames. I looked for key phrases that determined what their primary argument, either for or against the high-speed rail was. I determined the frames as I read along, allowing for the most accurate descriptions of arguments for and against the high-speed rail.

### **Geographic Analysis**

I also analyzed where these articles occurred across the state of California. Using [www.truckads.com](http://www.truckads.com), I broke California down into 12 major media markets. These media markets

are used to target ads to specific viewers and locations for political and retail reasons. The map below breaks down these media markets. Using this map, I determined which media market an article originated in providing where these discussions were occurring the most.

**Figure 1. California Major Media Markets** Media Market map from [www.truckads.com](http://www.truckads.com) showing the breakdown of the 12 major media markets across California.



## RESULTS

### Study System/Editorial Collection/Geographic Analysis

I found 86 Editorials across 16 Newspapers that mentioned the California High Speed Rail from January 2002 to present. The frequency of location of the editorials corresponding to the 12 media markets was skewed primarily towards the Bay Area with over 65% of articles occurring between San Francisco, Oakland, and San Jose. Los Angeles followed with nearly 21% and the rest occurring under 5% (Table 2).

**Table 2. Media Market Definition and Quantity of Editorials**

<b>Location</b>	<b>Media Market</b>	<b>Editorial Count</b>	<b>%</b>
Chico, Redding	1	2	2.33
Eureka	2	2	2.33
Fresno, Visalia	3	1	1.16
Los Angeles	4	18	20.93
Monterey, Salinas	5	1	1.16
Palm Springs	6	0	0.00
Sacramento, Stockton, Modesto	7	2	2.33
San Diego	8	0	0.00
San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose	9	56	65.12
Santa Barbara, Santa Maria	10	0	0.00
San Luis Obispo, Bakersfield	11	4	4.65
Yuma, El Centro	12	0	0.00

Further analysis calculated the frequency of editorials as they appeared over time in three distinct periods. These periods are January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002 – November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2008, November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 – December 31<sup>st</sup> 2011, and January 1<sup>st</sup> 2012 – Present (Table 3). Between November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and December 31, 2011, the highest number of Editorials appeared accounting for nearly 57% of all editorials.

**Table 3. Time Period Definition and Quantity of Editorials**

<b>Time Analysis</b>	<b>Editorial Count</b>	<b>Time Period</b>	<b>%</b>
Jan. 1 2002- Nov. 4 2008	19	1	22.09
Nov. 5 2008-Dec. 31 2011	49	2	56.98
Jan 1. 2012-Present	18	3	20.93

Additionally, the author of the article was considered and placed in two categories of Staff Editorials or Letters to the Editor. 56% of editorials were Staff Editorials (Table 4).

**Table 4. Editorial Type**

Editorial Type	Number of Editorials	%
Staff Editorials	48	55.81
Letters to the Editor	38	44.19

## Discourse Analysis

I found 6 major frames. (Table 5). Examples of quotes from these frames in newspapers are listed below. Fiscal Benefit and Detriment as a frame focused on the monetary gains or losses and potential impacts to the state economy. Multi-Benefit as a frame focused either on the benefits of the rail like monetary and environmental benefits whereas Multi-Detriment focused on the flaws and shortcomings of the project as well as money. The Future Importance frame focused on the benefits of the rail to future populations, mostly noting the need for infrastructure in the face of a large California population. Lack of Voter Support occurred as a frame rather late and mostly argued that given the chance, California voters would revert their 2008 decision and cancel the high-speed rail bonds.

**Table 5. Editorial Frames and Examples**

Stance	Frame	Example
Pro-CHSR	Fiscal Benefit	<i>“With high-speed rail starting construction next year, the huge number of new jobs generated will dramatically increase tax revenues flowing into the state budget.”</i>
	Multi-Benefit	<i>“We know it will create thousands of jobs, put billions of dollars back into our flailing economy, connect major economic centers and provide much-needed mobility for Californians.”</i>
	Future Importance	<i>“By abandoning high-speed rail now for the next 10 to 20 years, state leaders are dooming the state and a fast-growing population to a terrible quality of life.”</i>
Anti-CHSR	Fiscal Detriment	<i>“Trying to stimulate the state’s economy by financing the high-speed boondoggle express would be a grave mistake.”</i>
	Multi-Detriment	<i>“What seemed like a good concept has not fared so well in the planning stage. For starters, it’s in the wrong place.”</i> <i>“It’s at the wrong time. Most Californians won’t be able to use it for a decade.”</i>
	Lack of Voter Support	<i>“But here’s the most significant change: voter attitudes toward the project. Although Proposition 1A passed with nearly 60 percent of the vote, public support has waned. A December Field Poll found that 59 percent of likely voters would oppose high-speed rail if it were on the ballot today.”</i>

The Multi-Benefit and Fiscal Detriment frame appeared almost the same amount of times in 25.58% and 24.42% of articles respectively. This was followed closely by Multi-Detriment appearing 18.6% of time and Future Importance occurring 13.95% of the time. Fiscal Benefit and Lack of Voter Support appeared the least at 8.14% and 9.3% respectively (Table 6).

**Table 6. Major Frames and Quantity of Editorials**

<b>Frame Analysis</b>	<b>Quantity of Frames</b>	<b>%</b>
Fiscal Benefit	7	8.14
Multi-Benefit	22	25.58
Future Importance	12	13.95
Fiscal Detriment	21	24.42
Multi-Detriment	16	18.60
Lack of Voter Support	8	9.3

## **DISCUSSION**

I found trends between discursive techniques and framing occurred in many articles. Omissions of information varied across the frames, shown most in the ‘fiscal benefit and detriment’ and ‘multi benefit and detriment’ frames. Additionally, connotation of articles exhibited a major shift over time from neutrally connoted to strongly connoted. The frame most utilized shifted from multi-benefit to fiscal detriment and then settling again with multi-benefit.

### **Omission and Authority**

Patterns of omission of information differed across frames. The frames of ‘Fiscal Benefit and Multi Benefit ‘against’ Fiscal Detriment and Multi Detriment best evidence this. ‘Fiscal Benefit’ tended to champion the economic benefits like job creation, stimulus funds, federal money, etc. When ‘Multi Benefit’ mentioned economic benefits, it was essentially the same as ‘Fiscal Benefit.’ Both of these omitted the cost of the rail over all time periods. This omission helps to strengthen the author’s statements, using broad sweeping language rather than specifics,



tailoring the argument to what the reader wants to hear (Lee, 2006). Because of this though, their authority was not nearly as strong. Meanwhile, the detriment frames did the exact opposite and gained more credibility and authority than the other articles would have. As a whole they encompassed a comprehensive analysis, benefits and costs included. Additionally, they emphasized the cost of the high-speed rail using costs estimated at the time the articles were written. For example,

“Over the long-term, high-speed rail provides a foundation for ongoing economic prosperity because it will dramatically improve transportation access around the state and free us from volatile fuel costs. (Lytton, 2012)”

“Oopsie, did we say \$45 billion? We meant \$98 billion. No, no, wait, \$68 billion. Well, you know, around there somewhere. Did we say San Diego and Sacramento would be included in those numbers? Drat, our bad, they aren't. (Contra Costa Times, 2012)”

The first quote paints a broad picture of economic benefits with no evidence. The second quote emphasizes the projected cost of the rail and how varied it has been. With this, generally the reader hears and sees what they want to see, and the authors know this. This omission then leads to a steeper divide on the issue (Sotillo, 1999).

### **Connotations/Labels**

Connotation and labels shifted from a neutral connotation that spoke with little emotion in the articles from 2002-2006 to a strong connotation in the most recent articles that featured very strong words and attitudes. Neutral connotation refers to the word choice and use of words with no emotional attachment. Strong connotation refers to either positive or negatively connoted words with strong emotional attachment. Some examples of these strong connotations include “boondoggle,” “train wreck” and “bungled project” amongst others. Initially, the discourse on high-speed rail politics had a neutral connotation in the formative stage, 2002-2006. The level of connotation grew much stronger from 2006 until today. This reflects the increasing opposition and general frustration over the changes to the high-speed rail plan from 2008 until today. This echoes the findings of Teo (2000) who concluded that the motivation behind “over-

lexicalization” or overly connoted words, is not to provide facts, but to orient the reader’s perceptions a certain way. In the case of the high-speed rail, strong, negative words were used to present the idea that the rail was a poorly managed, poorly planned, and poorly funded business venture.

“That’s an admirable sentiment, but if the state or nation is going to think big, it also must think smart, and there is nothing smart about the high-speed rail boondoggle. The High-Speed Rail Authority has bungled the project from the beginning with poor management, a lack of a coherent business plan, no realistic estimates of cost, ridership or fares, no final decision on the route and even less chance of obtaining the tens of billions of dollars in private financing that is needed to complete the system.”

This quote perfectly exemplifies this strongly negative connotation using a very negative tone combined with words that suggest ‘failure’ like boondoggle and bungled.

## **Formality**

Across the board, editorials were largely informal in nature. This makes sense given that most are argumentative rather than informative like most news articles. There were also some formalized editorials, but were largely outweighed by the informal. This informality stems largely from the author and the reason for writing. My findings align with those of Morrison and Love (1999) and Sotillo and Starace (1996), who found that Letters to the Editor typically were characterized by a ‘problem non-solution’ wherein writers “[raised] serious issues for discussion but no viable solutions are put forth.” In terms of the discourse, high-speed rail opponents’ arguments focused solely on not building the high-speed rail and offered explanations as to why, but no compromises or policy changes. In that regard then, they do not offer a viable solution to the high-speed rail as they merely point and complain at its faults. Rather than suggest other infrastructure projects that could benefit from rail money, they complain and don’t offer much more than that.

## **Framing**

From 2002 to present, there were major frame shifts in how editorials framed the issue. Initially, editorials focused on the ‘Multi Benefit’ frame that stressed the economic, environmental, and benefits. This shifted to a major increase in the second time period of the ‘Fiscal Detriment’ frame. Given the history of the high-speed rail, this makes sense given the downturn in the United States and California Economies coupled with the nearly tripling of price for the high-speed rail. These two frames represented the most popular in the newspapers analyzed. The two least popular frames ‘Lack of Voter Support’ and ‘Future Importance’ both appeared much later on, generally from 2011 to present. Most surprising to me was a lack of environmental framing or mentions. Of the 86 articles analyzed, only 5 mentioned anything remotely environmental in terms of benefits or costs. Of those 5, only 2 were entirely environmental. This is similar in nature to the findings of Arvai and Mascarenhas who noticed a major in shift in newspaper coverage from environmental issues to industry concerns over logging (Arvai, Mascarenhas, 2001). My findings similarly illuminate great concern for the business and cost end of things rather than the health of the environment.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Lexis Nexis had a decent collection of editorials, but very few representing the major newspapers. I did not analyze a single article from the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, or San Diego Union Tribune representing a good portion of readership in California. Unfortunately, most of these are only available for a fee charged per article making it unfeasible for a college student with a small research budget to access them. I believe this limits my inference as a higher readership could result in higher public participation via letters to the editor. On the other hand however, I do feel that I sampled a good body of California over time and covered a lot more ground than these 3 newspapers would have covered.

With the knowledge I now have, I would definitely attempt to include some of the bigger newspapers in the analysis. Analysis of the editorials printed in major newspapers would definitely further clear up my analysis and provide more accurate results. Future studies should

consider the discourse of high speed rail development in media on a national level. As late as the 2013 State of the Union, President Obama pushed for continued high-speed rail growth and development across the country. Given the attention it is now getting, it is important to understand the frames being presented across the US.

### ***Broader Implications and Conclusions***

In conclusion, I found that writers used editorials to frame the issue of the high-speed rail primarily in fiscal terms and the benefits or detriments that could come with it. They also used a number of discursive techniques to prove their point, but primarily relied on providing or not providing accurate facts and figures. As mentioned above, high-speed rail opponents often pointed out the rising costs of the rail, citing the current facts and figures giving the public accurate and up to date information while proponents focused more broadly on promised economic benefits like jobs without real numbers. Sotillo and Starace (1996) found this as well performing CDAa of letters to the editors around politics in a small town.

Letters to the editor and editorials represent unique positions and discourse genres that allow the public to control the discussion and engage the issues they feel are most present. From the frame analysis then, we can safely conclude that people tend to be most worried about the financial cost of the high-speed rail and the effect that could have on an already weak California economy. Conversely, the frame people were least worried about was the environment. As mentioned above, in 86 articles, only 5 mentioned the environment and 2 were all about it. Speaking more broadly now, this study reveals an attitude that people tend to be more concerned with the financial cost and detriment than the environmental impact or benefit that that cost could bring.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

First and foremost, I'd like to thank Kurt Spreyer. Kurt has been an amazing thesis advisor and very supportive of my efforts since the beginning of this process. Next I'd like to thank the rest of Team ES 196 comprising of Patina Mendez, Carrie Cizauskas, Rachael Marzion, Anne Murray, and Vicki Wojcik for their efforts in helping and organizing our class on

top of pregnancies, dissertations, and the rest of their studies. I'd also like to thank John Battles and the crew manning ES 100 for their training, which has been useful too. My workgroup, DAFATT Socialists also needs to be thanked for all their help with peer reviews and questions as well as for emotional support. I also need to acknowledge my family and roommates for their help and support, especially following my foot injury and surgery.

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