

Post-factual politics

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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James Bennet's [post from earlier this week](#) made an important and timely point. First he observes that a lot of political reporting has taken a turn from the destructive banality of he-said-she-said false equivalency stuff and toward playing an explicit fact-checking role. ([I'm among those](#) who welcome this enthusiastically.)

Then he poses this somewhat chilling question: "What if it turns out that when the press calls a lie a lie, nobody cares?"

Bennet was talking about the Romney campaign's [ads misrepresenting](#) the Obama administration's policy on welfare-to-work. But his post seems all the more relevant today, in the wake of Congressman Ryan's speech at the RNC last night—a real barn burner, and one that burned some of its barns with the potent fuel of brazen deception.

The fact-checkers are everywhere; [Dave Weigel](#) and the [AP](#) offer two of the better rundowns. But does it matter? Bennet titles his post with this quote [from Romney pollster Neil Newhouse](#): "We're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact-checkers." A shocking quote, but perhaps mostly because given Newhouse's profession and incentives, he's absolutely correct. Well-crafted lies poll better than inconvenient truths—apparently even when the press is doing its job.

News journalists position themselves as neutral referees interested primarily in facts. Partisans often think the news media sympathizes with the other guys. It's an endless debate: which way, if any, does the media lean?

But opposing the news media precisely for its insistence on facts—for doing its job—is a whole other thing. The durability of the slam "liberal media" may help the Romney campaign get away with it. (If your starting point is to distrust the fact-checkers, it's easy to be selective about which of their facts to take seriously.) But it's important not to dismiss this as another day of tit for tat in the pure-partisan world of campaigning. The news media is stepping up and calling spades spades, and it's doing this using not pro-Obama talking points but basic, verifiable facts. And

Romney staffers are being similarly blunt in indicating that this isn't incentive enough for them to find a different line of attack.

In other words, the lines here aren't drawn between left and right but between empiricism and pure narrative license—and it's not at all clear that the electorate prefers the facts. That's alarming no matter which candidate you favor.