Parents just want to know what’s best for their children; but in a world of infinite access to information, discerning the truth is often difficult. In the case of vaccines, scientists and doctors in favor of vaccines often claim that science is on their side: a mountain of evidence shows that the risk of vaccinating your child is far lower than the risk of exposing your child to infectious diseases. But people who are opposed to vaccinations often take a similar point of view: they argue that mainstream science is corrupted, that reported results are flawed or outright fiction, and that to protect your child you must put them at risk of disease. In this essay, I will look at the rhetoric of the vaccination debate by examining two articles: Robert F. Kennedy’s “Deadly Immunity,” published simultaneously in *Rolling Stone* and *Slate* in 2004; and Amy Wallace’s “An Epidemic of Fear,” published in *Wired* in 2009. My analysis of these two articles will show how, although they take opposing positions, **they both use a rhetorical claim to science** as the basis of their argument. Underlying the fight over vaccinations is a fight over the right to access scientific truth.

Although the vaccination debate rages across the internet, Kennedy and Wallace’s articles share a similar medium and audience, and are similarly credible. By 2004 Kennedy had developed a reputation as a respectable environmental reporter with particular knowledge about mercury pollution, which had caused serious damage to people and the environment. [WALLACE:…] *Rolling Stone*, *Slate*, and *Wired* are all respected popular news forums that speak to a similar audience: the educated, liberal middle class. Though *Rolling Stone* is more closely aligned with the entertainment industry, it has published hard-hitting journalistic pieces such as []. *Slate* is affiliated with the respected newspaper []. *Wired,* meanwhile, is a magazine that specializes in science and technology reporting. The similarity of these magazines suggests that Kennedy and Wallace were appealing to an overlapping, if not entirely equal, audience: an audience of non-scientists who have been educated to be both critical of public discourse, and supportive of scientific research. This is an audience that is likely to be persuaded by scientific evidence. It is also, interestingly, the population that is most likely to stop giving their children vaccines.

The nature of the audience may help to explain why scientific truth is at the heart of both Kennedy and Wallace’s articles. Both Kennedy and Wallace claim that the scientific evidence is irrefutably in favor of their own position. The two articles’ persuasive claims, however, rest on different ideas about scientific values. For Kennedy, skepticism is the most important scientific value. For Wallace, science is important because it is rational. These two positions are revealed in the way the authors establish their own credibility, and in the way they question the credibility of their opponents. Kenned writes, “As an attorney and environmentalist who has spent years working on issues of mercury toxicity, I frequently met mothers of autistic children who were absolutely convinced that their kids had been injured by vaccines. Privately, I was skeptical.” Here Kennedy bases his authority in his skepticism about the dangers of vaccines: this skepticism reveals both his respect for public health and his respect for scientific truth over anecdotal evidence, no matter how emotionally compelling it may be.

Wallace, in contrast, shows her respect for rationality in her description of Paul Offit, the scientist and pro-vaccination activist who is the protagonist (or hero) of the article. In her brief biography of Offit, he reminisces, “What I loved about science was its reason. […] It’s beautiful, really” (8). Science is linked to rational behavior and rational behavior is linked to beauty, an emotional response that evokes increased respect for the scientific method. The important difference between Kennedy’s and Offit’s claims to credibility is that though they both respect science, Offit’s description of science makes it seem infallible, while Kennedy is committed to testing science to make sure it is sound.

If Kennedy and Wallace emphasize skepticism and rationality, respectively, to make their own claims to credibility, they describe their opponents in the opposite light. Kennedy’s main opposition is the scientists and public health officials involved in protecting vaccination practices from critique. Kennedy quotes Offit as saying “Science… is best left to scientists” (6), a phrase which serves as an attempt to shoot down skepticism. But this phrase appears within the context of a broader effort on Kennedy’s part to debunk scientists by revealing their ties to industry and their conspiracy to cover up data. The implication is that while science is trustworthy, scientists are not.

Wallace, meanwhile, describes the anti-vaccination opponents as people driven by passions and perhaps madness, but little else. Her opening description of Offit’s opponents is a good example of this. She quotes Jim Carrey saying “Grab ‘em and stab ‘em,” a phrase intended to evoke the violence of vaccination practices. But she turns it against Carrey and other anti-vaccination activists by using this language to build up an atmosphere of violence, moving from this quote to more violent e-mails that Offit has received, before finally culminating with an actual attack. In the face of this violence, Offit comes off as astonishingly calm and rational when he says, jokingly, “I don’t think he wanted to hurt me … He was just excited to be close to the personification of such evil” (1).

Comparing these two approaches, we can see how in both cases, the authors seek to erode their opponents’ credibility: Kennedy reveals the scientists’ hypocrisies, while Wallace demonizes the anti-vaccination activists. For Kennedy, the scientists don’t produce good science because they fail to be skeptical; for Wallace, the anti-vaccination activists don’t understand good science because they fail to be rational.

By examining the ways that Wallace and Kennedy establish and critique credibility, I have sought to reveal how their arguments are based on rhetorical claims to authority over scientific truth. Kennedy, who is not a scientist, emphasizes skepticism, suggesting that the scientific community cannot be trusted to provide accurate scientific information despite a plethora of available scientific fact. Wallace, on the other hand, argues that only the scientific community can be trusted to respond rationally to scientific thought, while those who oppose vaccinations are overly emotional, or even crazy. Interestingly, both rationality and skepticism are qualities that are highly valued by the scientific community. At stake in this debate over vaccinations, then, is access to scientific truth.