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Rhetoric 309k

Essay 1.1:   
Rationality Versus Skepticism in the Vaccination Debate

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 comparing 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 claim absolute scientific authority over their argument. Their ideas of scientific authority, however, are different: for Kennedy, scientific authority comes from skepticism, while for Wallace, it is based in rationality. I will argue this point first by showing how the two authors lay claim to scientific truth. Then I will consider how they establish their own credibility – and critique that of their opponents – in order to show how they prioritize different kinds of truth.

Although the vaccination debate rages across the internet, Kennedy and Wallace’s articles share a similar medium and audience, and at the time of their publication, they would have seemed similarly credible.[[1]](#footnote-1) 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. Kennedy describes a “staggering number” (1) of studies supporting his position at one point; he writes of “truckloads” of studies elsewhere (3). This mountain of evidence is further supported by dismissive quotes from scientific experts: “You couldn't even construct a study that shows thimerosal is safe” (3) says Dr. Boyd Haley. Though taking a different position, Wallace uses a similarly unequivocal approach. She writes, “To be clear, there is no credible evidence to indicate that any of this is true. None” (4). The double repetition of none, followed by a slew of scientific reports, makes her claims seem incontrovertible. The emphasis on “credibility” allows her to dismiss with one sweeping gesture any and all controversy as what she calls “pseudoscience.” (For Wallace, Kennedy’s article, among others, falls squarely into this category.)

Kennedy and Wallace both take equal but opposite positions in their interpretation of the scientific data around vaccination risk. At stake are people’s lives. The title of Kennedy’s article, “Deadly Immunity,” reveals the hypocrisy in vaccination by suggesting a link between immunization (which should save lives) and death. (Kennedy’s article, of course, claims no such thing, linking immunization instead to autism.) Wallace’s article title, “An epidemic of fear,” similarly links anti-vaccination to epidemics, suggesting a link between the anti-vaccination movement and mass disease. (There have been, of course, no epidemics caused by anti-vaccination practices.) These hyperbolic titles reveal the stakes of the debate, just as the dogmatic approach to scientific truth shows that there is no room for nuanced positions.

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. To establish his own credibility, Kennedy 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” (3). Here Kennedy bases his authority on 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 through 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, she quotes him reminiscing, “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 opponents are the scientists and public health officials involved in protecting vaccination practices from critique – people like Paul Offit. Kennedy quotes Offit as saying “Science… is best left to scientists” (6), an elitist statement intended to shoot down Kennedy’s skepticism by questioning his authority. 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” (1), 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.

In this essay, I showed how two apparently credible articles about vaccination lay claim to different kinds of scientific authority to make their case. To support evidence of a conspiracy to hide vaccination risks, Kennedy emphasizes the importance of skepticism towards science, ultimately 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. Both Kennedy and Wallace believe that good science will make us healthier and safer – if only we knew what the good science was.

References

Kennedy, R. F. Jr. (2005, Jun 30-Jul 14). Deadly Immunity. *Rolling Stone,* *977-978,* 57-66. Retrieved from LexisNexis.com.

Wallace, A. (2009, October 19). An Epidemic of Fear: How Panicked Parents Skipping Shots Endangers Us All. *Wired*. Retrieved from www.wired.com

1. Kennedy’s article has been largely debunked by the scientific community: many say that he misinterpreted events to create an artificial conspiracy, while others pointed out problems with some of his statistics. *Slate* has since retracted the article; *Rolling Stone* did ntot. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)