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Dr. Hansen

WRI 1000

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### The Rhetoric of Truth and Trust in Modern Politics

The privilege to vote has been engrained in every American child's mind since primary school. The privilege to elect the leader of the United States boasts a sense of power and gives rise to an overwhelming nationalism in this country. However, the act of engaging, participating, and obtaining knowledge of political science can be a daunting task. Especially since the turn of the century, media has been the one-stop-shop for everything going on in local, state, and national politics. Newspapers, magazines and online publications are so easily accessible today that advancing personal knowledge in political science is hardly the issue. Today, the challenge in politics is discerning the truth from fiction, the trustworthy from the unreliable, and the politicians from the human beings. In a special edition of *Rolling Stone* in 2000, author David Foster Wallace was commissioned to follow candidate John McCain on the Trail for two weeks to get the inside scoop on politics. In this process, Wallace stirs up the questions voters ask about politicians and the portrayal of their personal character through media, the reliability of this information, and how to find the truth in this time filled with fake news and anticandidates.

What appealed to many young voters in the 2000 presidential campaign, and what David Foster Wallace found intriguing about McCain, is that he took a stance of juxtaposing the nation's preconception that politicians are dishonest and self-serving by marketing himself as someone who "will always. Tell you. The truth" (Wallace 188). In doing this, McCain drew in

**Commented [HT1]:** This starts out pretty broad. Considering your focus on Wallace's essay, would it be helpful to introduce that essay and its focus sooner?

**Commented [HT2]:** Your interpretive statement? Can you make this more complex by positioning it in relation to another perspective?

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voters from all demographics that appreciated his candor and unrelenting habit of putting others before himself. Perhaps the most recognizable feature of McCain's candidacy and the cornerstone for his press's marketing strategy is the recollection of his experience as a POW during the Vietnam War. Wallace prompts readers to consider that "This gives him the moral authority both to utter lines about causes beyond self-interest and to expect us...to believe he means them" (Wallace 166). But even through the push to put our faith in McCain, and Wallace's interpretation of the campaign, readers can not expect the "Straight Talk Express" or the voice of *Rolling Stone* to be completely nonpartisan in their claims. The extent to which McCain's POW past and his tendency to say "things are manifestly true but which no other mainstream candidate will say" (Wallace 162) have been spun by media in ways greater than Wallace, and young voters, are willing to admit. And in the same way that McCain's campaign portrays him approaching the race from an antithetical place of candor, in comparison to the other candidates, David Foster Wallace renders himself as cognisant and sympathetic to the readers' apathetic attitude toward politics. In both cases, the politician or journalist the audience is seeing is no more than a component of a larger agenda prompting us to vote in their favor or read their work.

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Every aspect of politics is tailored to a particular audience; spun in a way that will reel voters in and grab ahold of their attention. In the introduction of "Up Simba", Wallace dissuades readers from believing that he has an agenda other than giving his honest account of what went down on the Trail, but looking closely at his intended audience and the purpose of the article, I am convinced otherwise. Wallace is very forward with his audience, calling out specifically that the readers of this essay are indifferent Americans in the lowest age bracket of voters. In suggesting to readers that Wallace himself is "NOT A POLITICAL JOURNALIST" and

someone who will tell it like it is, readers separate “Up, Simba” from other forms of media and give more weight to Wallace’s perspective. Through exercising the assumptions that their audience of young people have a common dislike or distrust towards either past politicians or political journalists, McCain and Wallace divert the audience’s attention away from the fact that they are cut from the same cloth. Upon first read, readers of “Up Simba” conclude that Wallace is different from other writers reporting on similar topics, but I argue that taking the stance of neutrality is just another example of how media can transfigure writer-reader relationships to be advantageous to a particular party.

**Commented [HT4]:** This is very interesting, and it makes me want to hear more about how they are different.

In “Up, Simba” there is a slow and steady progression of Wallace using McCain’s candidacy narrative in hopes to inspire the audience to vote in response to finding a perspective empathetic to being a young voter at the turn of the century. In this process, readers foster a comradery with Wallace because he showcases his understanding of the intended reader’s struggle through his distinctive writing voice and anomalous approach to writing about politics. In the development of this relationship, Wallace’s essay morphs from “the truth as one person saw it” (Wallace 157) to a plea for young people to employ their political values and cast them on election day. Wallace uses the developmental structure of his essay to showcase microcosmically how the establishment of trust through formation of relationship can lead to subconscious manipulation. Readers often find that the “Substantially Farther Behind the Scenes than You’re Apt to Want to Be” is unnecessary and relentlessly detailed, I thought this at first as well. But really what Wallace is doing in that section is he is vividly painting the picture for readers on just how altered the information voters get is as a result of being filtered through the campaign press. This behind the scenes look gives readers of *Rolling Stone* a look at just how many people are dedicated to portraying McCain as an honorable war hero and unexpectedly

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honest politician. Now, he may be those things already, but that does not erase the fact that hordes of people are working day and night to amplify these characteristics and to highlight these "facts" from every angle to ensure McCain comes out looking "in the ballpark of a real human being" as one writer for *Rolling Stone* would say.

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On the journey through Wallace's essay, readers see a pattern of alienation between the press crew and the tech guys, the Twelve Monkeys and Wallace, and other politicians and McCain; and, based on these pairings, we inadvertently pick teams. We see how down to earth the tech crew is in comparison to the press doing their "Cellular Waltz...like the cogs of some strange diffuse machine" (Wallace 197) and begin to see things from the tech guys' perspective more easily. In light of looking into the campaign from this obscure angle, readers peek into how dissociated most of the media seems from the voting public, thus giving rise to how Wallace illuminates the exclusivity of the tech crew noting that they are guarded but have great story telling qualities and a general likability. Many of the details of their work seem mundane, but the fact that their firsthand perspectives are untainted by the media plays into Wallace's hand. In the section of the essay entitled "Negativity" Wallace suggests that his young readers entertain the idea that voting is meaningful by including the opinion of an NBC cameraman. He goes on to explain that when McCain was facing losing voters by retaliating against a negative comment made by George W. Bush, voters get "cynical and disgusted with the whole thing they don't even bother to vote" (Wallace 206). This marks the climax of Wallace's push for readers to vote. He starts with "Let's pause here on second for a quick *Rolling Stone* PSA" and vehemently reminds readers that "there is *no such thing as not voting*: you either vote by voting, or you vote by staying home and tacitly doubling the value of some Diehard's vote" (Wallace 207).

**Commented [HT7]:** What are you pointing readers to here?

**Commented [HT8]:** There's an interesting tension here between whether Wallace is pushing his readers to vote or telling his readers why establishment candidates don't want them to vote.

Underneath all of the multifaceted layers of "Up Simba" lies the simple question regarding the trustworthiness of news sources relaying information about politics and the significance of the media on the 2000 presidential election. Near the end of the essay Wallace addresses this same skepticism in saying "At the times your cynicism is winning, you'll find that it's possible to see even McCain's most attractive qualities as just marketing angles"(Wallace 229). Here even the most un-political politician of his time, *the* anticandidate and his campaign can appear phony. How can the press get away with headlining McCain's campaign with the nightmarish details of his past as a prisoner of war? It can seem that politics is hardly is a science or way of giving the legislation back to the people, with such a heavy influence by media, politics is no less dramatized than the crime dramas on prime time TV.

**Commented [HT9]:** Yes—why does Wallace argue that this kind of thing bums us out?

In his essay, David Foster Wallace is not attempting to dissuade readers away from politics altogether, but rather encourage them to err on the side of caution when making political decisions. He does this by emphasizing how even McCain, who is running as a populist anticandidate, known for being unrefined by media and strikingly honest has a team behind him altering his portrayal to his benefit. Wallace reinforces this theme in: "The point . . . is that there's a tension between what John McCain's appeal is and the way that appeal must be structures and packaged in order to get him elected" (Wallace 231). In "Up Simba" readers are asked to analyze how much influence media has on politics and how this can alter the reliability of the information we use to make informed decisions. Through Wallace's connection with readers and the structure of detail in his essay, the audience questions their larger preconceptions about politics by examining how opinion can be transfigured even within the tight bounds of this piece. Although Wallace acknowledges the complexity in how information is altered by

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campaigns and distributed to voters through the media, “Up Simba” attempts to approach the topic from a stance of neutrality while quietly persuading his audience to vote.

## Bibliography

Wallace, David Foster. "Up, Simba: Seven Days on the Trail of an Anticandidate." *Consider the Lobster*. Little, Brown, and Company, 2006. pp. 156-234

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This is a strong draft. This paper offers a thoughtful reading of Wallace's "Up, Simba," with careful attention being given to how Wallace uses his casual "outsider" stance to encourage his readers to think about politics differently than he might be able to if he were writing in a more conventional way about politics. I think you're right that there are a lot of similarities between what Wallace is doing here and what he describes McCain as doing and, as I mention in one of my marginal comments above, this also brings me to wonder more about what significant ways Wallace and McCain are different in their goals. Put another way: If McCain's goal is to inspire young voters, as Wallace claims it is, does Wallace also want to inspire voters? You claim, at the end of page 4, that Wallace wants to push his readers to vote, but I wonder how the cynicism that you describe—both Wallace's cynicism and that of young voters—might complicate a straightforward challenge to get out the vote. In what ways does Wallace challenge his readers to recognize their own cynicism and reconcile themselves to it, and what do you find significant about that? Does he cut through the BS, or just create a different kind of BS? And, as you continue thinking about these questions, how do you want to challenge your own readers to think differently about this essay. What will readers think of "Up, Simba" before reading this, and how what will they think after?

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