

Ben Stein's Trojan Horse

Mobilizing the State House and Local News Agenda

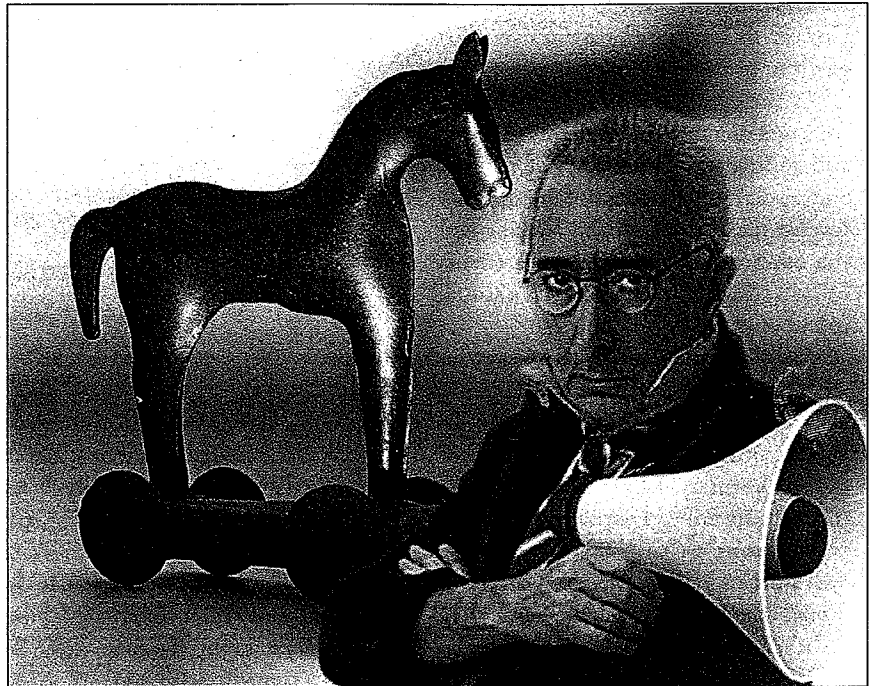
MATTHEW C. NISBET

Back in April 2008, as the documentary *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* premiered in more than 1,000 theaters across the country, I gathered with friends for a Friday-evening screening in downtown Washington, D.C. The medium-sized Regal Cinemas theater was about 80 percent full, with an audience that appeared to be the typical urban professional crowd for the surrounding arts and entertainment district, a demographic that is more likely to read the *New York Times* at a coffee house on Sunday than to attend church.

As I watched the film and monitored audience reaction, I grew convinced that although *Expelled's* claims have been thoroughly debunked (NCSE 2008; *Scientific American* 2008; see also the critique in SI, May/June 2008 by Dan Whipple and Nathan Bupp's piece in SI, July/August 2008), the documentary's long-term impact remains dangerously underestimated.

In the film, the comedic actor Ben Stein plays the role of a conservative Michael Moore, taking viewers on an investigative journey into the realm of "Big Science," an institution in which, Stein concludes, "scientists are not allowed to even think thoughts that involve an intelligent creator." *Expelled* outrageously suggests that Darwinism, as Stein calls evolution, led to the Holocaust. He also suggests that scientists have been denied tenure and that research has been suppressed, all in the service of hiding the supposedly fatal flaws in evolutionary theory.

Matthew Nisbet is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at American University in Washington, D.C.



As I watched the film and monitored audience reaction, I grew convinced that although *Expelled's* claims have been thoroughly debunked, the documentary's long-term impact remains dangerously underestimated.

Expelled employs several techniques common to political advertising. First, Stein's narrative relies heavily on the use of metaphor. For example, his version of the "3 A.M. phone call" is to bookend the film with historic footage of the Berlin Wall and a repetitive emphasis on freedom as a central American value. The sin-

ister implication is that "Darwinism" has led to atheism, fascism, and communism. As a corollary, if Americans can join Stein in tearing down the wall of censorship in science, it would open the way to religious freedom and cultural renewal.

Expelled also strategically manipulates emotions while playing to ignorance

among movie-going audiences. For example, as a way of triggering anger, Stein misleadingly defines celebrity atheists such as Richard Dawkins, P.Z. Myers, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens as representatives of “establishment science.” In interviews, as these scientists compare religion to fairies, hobgoblins, and knitting, the implication for viewers is that in order to leave room for God in society, intelligent design (ID) needs to be taken seriously.

In the screening I attended, somewhat predictably there were chuckles and positive laughter in reaction to Stein and audibly negative emotion directed toward the comments of Dawkins and the other scientists. As the film credits rolled at the end, there was even a strong round of *approving applause*.

Expelled's misleading emphasis on atheist punditry as representative of science even had film critics bristling. In reviews otherwise harshly dismissive of the documentary, Jeffrey Kluger of *Time* magazine described Dawkins and Myers's performances as “sneering, finger in the eye atheism,” while Justin Chang of *Variety* referred to Dawkins' commentary as “atheism taken to hateful extremes.”

There is no way of telling how representative the Washington, D.C., audience might be of the nation at large, although I have observed similar emotional reactions among university students with whom I have tested *Expelled's* YouTube clips. At various other locations across the country, several bloggers reported that they were the only person in the theater for a Sunday matinee or a weekday evening show. One thing, however, is certain: by documentary box-office standards, *Expelled* has made its mark.

With more than \$7.5 million in ticket sales according to the Web site Box Office Mojo, Stein's propaganda film ranks as either the sixth or seventh top grossing public affairs documentary of all time. Only Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, Morgan Spurlock's *SuperSize Me*, and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko*, and *Bowling for Columbine* have grossed more than *Expelled*. (After adjusting

for inflation, add Moore's 1989 *Roger and Me*.)

Premise Media, Inc., the production company that marketed *Expelled*, targeted two key demographics for the film. Predictably, a main segment included evangelicals and social conservatives, with the

Survey data specific to *Inconvenient Truth* and *Sicko* reveal similar selectivity bias and ideological reinforcement (Nisbet 2008; Kaiser 2007). Although similar data is not yet available for *Expelled*, according to news reports, Premise Media's own exit survey data

Since the 2005 Dover court decision, intelligent design had been off the national news radar, yet *Expelled* helped restart the media conversation, at least temporarily.

production company advertising heavily on political talk-radio stations and by way of Christian media and church networks. But in running advertising spots during *The Daily Show* and on *CNN*, the company also hoped to appeal to less religious twenty- and thirty-somethings, an audience more familiar with Ben Stein as a comedic actor and satirist than with the recent political skirmishes over evolution.

Despite these savvy marketing efforts, *Expelled* was unlikely to break the forces of ideological selectivity that have snared even the most successful documentaries. For example, polling data shows that the theater audience for *Fahrenheit 9/11*, which earned \$120 million at the box office, skewed heavily liberal and was more likely to live in “blue” rather than “red” counties of the country (Pew 2004). Moreover, a recent study finds that rather than converting movie-goers to support John Kerry during the 2004 election, the effects of the film were most likely to reinforce and intensify already strong anti-Bush sentiment (Stroud 2007). In short, *Fahrenheit 9/11* helped activate and mobilize the existing anti-Bush segment rather than persuade new converts.

from theaters in six states showed that 80 percent of the film's viewers during opening weekend considered themselves “born again” Christians (Hall 2008).

Yet, *Expelled's* influence stretches well beyond the theater and any ideological impact on viewers. As I reviewed in a recent report to the Ford Foundation, these indirect influences can be tracked across several different dimensions, with the most important impacts related to the general news and policy agenda (Nisbet 2007).

For example, although many mainstream film critics have savaged the documentary, Stein's arguments have received either uncritical or positive coverage in reviews at Christian or conservative Web sites, in appearances on *CNN* with Wolf Blitzer, ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live*, and by way of strong endorsements on conservative talk radio and cable news programs such as Rush Limbaugh, *Headline News'* Glenn Beck, and Fox News' *Hannity and Colmes*.

Since the 2005 Dover court decision, intelligent design had been off the national news radar, yet *Expelled* helped restart the media conversation, at least temporarily. Perhaps most importantly, by way of columns, op-eds, uncritical

features, and letters to the editor at local newspapers across the country, the film offered an opening and a new "authoritative" reference point for ID proponents to once again misleadingly argue that there are holes in evolutionary theory and censorship in schools.

Perhaps most troubling has been the advanced screenings for policymakers, interest groups, and other influentials.

Over the next few years, *Expelled's* enduring impact will be to serve as a vehicle for recruiting and mobilizing anti-evolution activists at the state and local level across the country.

Expelled's producers have previewed the film for the Missouri and Florida state legislatures, connecting the film's message to a proposed "Academic Freedom Act" in each state that would encourage teachers to discuss the alleged flaws in evolutionary science. As Stein strategically framed the matter at the screening in Florida: "This bill is not about teaching intelligent design. It's about free speech" (Julian 2008).

With each of these dozens of screenings there has likely been a strong intensification of commitment and emotion among the conservative activist base in attendance along with advocacy training, the raising of money, and the distribution of other resources, such as DVDs and literature. In particular, *Expelled* provides these activists with an increased repertoire of arguments, talking points, and examples to use with neighbors and friends.

There is even the possibility that the screenings helped anti-evolution groups

link up with new conservative coalition partners not previously involved in the issue. For example, Stein has shown *Expelled* at several meetings and venues here in Washington, D.C., including a special screening for Congressional staffers.

When the film moves to DVD distribution, expect more of these types of *Expelled* screenings, house parties, and church gatherings across the country, all

aimed at mobilizing a political movement in favor of anti-evolution bills. As *Reason* magazine's Ronald Bailey (2008) reports, at an April 15 press conference at the conservative Heritage Foundation, *Expelled's* financial backer Walt Ruloff said that as many as twenty-six states had been targeted this year with so-called "freedom bills." So far, bills introduced in Florida, Alabama, and Missouri have been voted down while similar bills are still up for full legislative vote in South Carolina and Louisiana (NCSE 2008b).

Over the next few years, *Expelled's* enduring impact will be to serve as a vehicle for recruiting and mobilizing anti-evolution activists at the state and local level across the country. The targeted audience will include school-board members, church leaders, legislators, journalists, and other opinion leaders. Shown in its entirety or perhaps more effectively repackaged in 10-15 minute outtakes, these screenings will combine

emotionally powerful metaphors with the commentary of various outspoken atheists to manipulate viewers' understanding of the important differences between science, religion, and atheism.

References

- Bailey, Ronald. 2008. April 16. Flunk this movie. *Reason*. Available online at www.reason.com/news/show/125988.html.
- Box Office Mojo. Gross earnings for documentary genre since 1982. Available online at www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=documentary.htm.
- Chang, Justin. 2008. April 11. Review: *Expelled: No intelligence allowed*. *Variety*. Available online at www.variety.com/review/VE1117936783.html?categoryid=31&cs=1.
- Hall, Cheryl. 2008. April 28. Intelligent design documentary creates stir. *Dallas Morning News*. Available online at www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/bus/columnists/chall/stories/DNHall_27bus.ART0.State.Edition.1.4655452.html.
- Kaiser Family Foundation 2008. Awareness and perceptions of *Sicko*. Available online at www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/pomr082707pkg.cfm.
- Kluger, Jeffrey. 2008. April 10. Ben Stein dukes it out with Darwin. *Time*. Available online at www.time.com/time/magazine/0,9263,7601080414,00.html.
- Julian, Liam. 2008. March 28. Academic anarchy. *Tampa Bay Tribune*. Available online at www2.tbo.com/content/2008/mar/28/na-academic-anarchy.
- National Center for Science Education. 2008a. *Expelled* exposed. Available online at www.expelledexposed.com/.
- National Center for Science Education 2008b. Louisiana's latest creationism bill moves to House floor. Available online at www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2008/LA/66_louisianas_latest_creationism_5_23_2008.asp.
- Nisbet, Matthew C. 2007. Understanding the social impact of documentary film. In K. Hirsch's, Documentaries on a mission: How non-profits are making movies for public engagement. A Future of Public Media Project, funded by the Ford Foundation. Center for Social Media, American University. Available online at www.centerforsocialmedia.org/files/pdf/docs_on_a_mission.pdf.
- . 2008. Moving beyond Gore's message: A look back (and ahead) at climate change communications. Committee for Skeptical Inquiry. Available online at www.csicop.org/scienceandmedia/beyond-gores-message.
- Pew Internet and American Life Project. 2004. Data memo. Available online at www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Politicaldocus.pdf.
- Scientific American*. 2008. *Expelled: No intelligence allowed*: *Scientific American's* take. Available online at www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=sci-am-reviews-expelled.
- Stroud, Natalie Jomini. 2007. Media effects, selective exposure, and Fahrenheit 9/11. *Political Communication*, 24 (4): 415-432.
- Whipple, Dan. 2008. Expelling all reason. *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* May/June, 32(3): 52-53. □