The Insider (1999) is a film rife with ethical dilemmas, suspense and controversy. It is based on a true story related to a 1994 episode of the CBS news show 60 Minutes that never aired. The plot puts Dr. Jeffrey Wigand (Russell Crowe) at odds with Brown & Williamson, the third largest tobacco companies in the country. Wigand was fired from his position as Vice President of Research and Development, at which he was instructed to hide information related to the addictive nature of nicotine. The plot takes off when Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino), producer for 60 Minutes, discovers that Wigand has a story to tell. The best way for Wigand to tell that story is with the help of Bergman, via an interview aired on 60 Minutes. However, tobacco companies have a history of viciously defending their profits, by whatever means necessary, and Brown & Williamson does just that. The story hits a climax as the interests and incentives of the television station CBS, 60 Minutes, Dr. Wigand and Brown & Williamson are played out.

Portrayal of Business

The film portrays business in an extremely negative light. It focuses on two central conflicts – one between Brown & Williamson and Wigand, the other between CBS Corporation and Bergman.

Brown & Williamson is the primary antagonist. The film is ripe with examples of the bad things they do. Their principle, most damaging offense is deceit. They are charged with covering up the addictive properties of nicotine and finding ways to exploit it to increase profits. For example, in Wigand’s interview for 60 Minutes, he says that tobacco companies view cigarettes only as a delivery device for nicotine. He also says they take advantage of the addictive properties by manipulating and adjusting them, a
practice known as “impact boosting,” and adding chemicals so that nicotine is more rapidly absorbed into a person’s blood stream. During the same interview, he accuses Brown & Williamson CEO Thomas Sandeford perjured himself in a testimony to the United States Congress.

In that testimony, the “seven dwarves”, the name given to the CEOs of the seven largest tobacco companies, delivered a statement on the addictive nature of cigarettes. They all claimed that “cigarettes and nicotine do not meet classic definitions of addiction.”

That deceit was not enough. Brown & Williamson also took whatever steps necessary to protect their secret. For example, they threatened Wigand’s and his family’s safety, got the state of Kentucky to issue a gag order on Wigand to block him from speaking publicly and attempted an image assassination campaign to discredit the information Wigand decided to leak.

The juxtaposition between Wigand’s perspective and their attempts at deceit is the lynchpin for Brown & Williamson’s image in the film. Wigand is portrayed as the victim, which implies that the viewer should see Brown & Williamson as the villain.

As the conflict between Brown & Williamson and Wigand escalates, CBS Corporation also comes under scrutiny when they block the airing of Wigand’s interview with 60 Minutes. Bergman, acting from an obligation to bring the truth to light, aggressively protests the decision. He uncovers facts that suggest that CBS Corporation’s motives for not airing the interview, despite its potential impact, is to not risk a lawsuit from Brown & Williamson that could disrupt a pending merger with Westinghouse.
The conflict between Wigand and Brown & Williamson and CBS Corporation’s resistance to airing Wigand’s interview lead to a sharply negative portrayal of business in the film.

**Ethical Dilemmas**

1) **Brown & Morrison’s determination to keep research information about the effects of nicotine hidden from the public.**

   The tobacco company does absolutely everything in their power to keep the public from knowing about the health effects of nicotine. In general terms, the film states that the seven largest companies spend $600 million per year in outside legal council, hundreds of thousands of people are dying from illnesses related to their product and they have never lost a lawsuit! At a detailed level, their actions against Wigand display their voracity. To summarize, they fired him as soon as he disagreed with them, threatened him and his family to get him to not leak information and filed a gag order to stop him from talking to the media. They took a firm stance on what they would tell the public, which was nothing. Their sole interest was to protect profits.

   This issue was resolved at the end of the film when *60 Minutes* finally aired Wigand’s interview. That was the first point at which the public heard a credible, third party account on the effects of nicotine.

   This issue should have been resolved long before Wigand became the whistleblower. It seems amazing that the Food and Drug Administration or another governmental agency never investigated. Even despite that, the tobacco company should have been honest about the effects of nicotine. Instead, they knew they were selling
products that lead to severe illness and death. Plus, they took every measure necessary to hide the information from the public just to protect profits.

2) Wigand’s dilemma related to becoming a whistleblower on the tobacco industry’s nondisclosure of information.

Wigand’s decision to become the whistleblower to the tobacco industry was portrayed as a very difficult decision with high costs either way. If he did not do the interview on 60 Minutes, he was not being true to himself. Before Brown & Williamson, he worked for health companies. It was clear that he had an internal struggle with keeping information he knew ultimately hurt people. If he did the interview, he would be subject to intense public scrutiny, exposed to potential for physical harm and his personal relationships would be stressed.

In the film, Wigand decided to do the interview and become a whistleblower. Brown & Williamson created a public image assassination campaign to discredit everything he said and his wife filed for divorce. In the end, the interview ran and informed millions of people.

This is in line with how the dilemma should have been resolved. Wigand made the right decision. The personal sacrifice he made is enormous. Despite this resolution being ethically correct, it is questionable that many people would do the same. In fact, there must be hundreds of others working in tobacco companies around the same time who had access to the same information. Obviously the tobacco company’s unethical attacks on Wigand and his family were the biggest problem with the resolution. And, they were also perhaps the biggest deterrent to other potential whistleblowers.
3) The CBS Corporation’s decision to edit the story developed by Bergman to not include Wigand’s interview.

CBS Corporation’s decision to edit Wigand’s interview out of their show on the tobacco industry was portrayed as an incredibly divisive, incentive-laden decision. *60 Minutes* is a whole show based on finding and airing information that the public would not otherwise see. The decision was made as a result of not wanting to upset the merger between CBS Corporation and Westinghouse. In other words, CBS Corporation censored their investigative news program to protect their financial interests. They created a version without Wigand’s interview, which was the real meat of the segment, as an alternative.

This was resolved by aggressive actions from Bergman to get the show on the air. He did that by leaking the situation to the *New York Times* editorial department to put pressure on CBS Corporation to air the show. It eventually worked. CBS Corporation’s only choice to maintain the integrity of *60 Minutes* was to prove them wrong and air it.

This situation should have been resolved without such aggressive intervention from Bergman. CBS Corporation should not have blocked the show in the first place. They have an ethical obligation to support the shows mission, freedom of speech and make information public when it could help people make better choices.

**What I Learned**

This film and exercise made me think about the power of large corporations, the responsibility that power implies and the responsibility of media as a corporate watchdog. It seems obvious that large corporations have a tendency to ignore the negative effects of their actions in favor of profit. This example, although sensationalized, still says to me
that with power comes responsibility. It affirmed my belief that a corporation’s goal cannot be just to provide profit to shareholders, but there must also be an element of social responsibility.

It also made me think about media’s role in business. I think it should be just as portrayed in this film. Bergman relentlessly pursued the truth, using a very credible source. Too often today, media is spoon fed by corporations. Media has a responsibility to objectivity that can be important in keeping businesses honest. But, it’s really up to media to maintain that objectivity.