"60 Minutes" producer Lowell Bergman reveals the real story behind "The Insider."

By David Weir

Nov. 5, 1999 | Lowell Bergman has been one of journalism's better-kept secrets over the past 25 years as he's labored in the shadows to produce work for much more famous figures such as Mike Wallace and Ed Bradley on CBS's "60 Minutes." But within the business, he is known to be among the best of his breed -- an investigative reporter, producer and researcher.

Bergman's relative anonymity is evaporating now with the release of "The Insider," which may make him better known as "the character Al Pacino plays." The film dramatizes how CBS News bowed to corporate pressures when it decided to pull a damning interview Mike Wallace conducted with a whistle-blower from the tobacco giant Brown & Williamson.

In the film, Bergman is cast favorably as a man of his word, the moral force who

http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/int/1999/11/05/bergman/
eventually persuades Wallace to come around to the side of good -- a detail Wallace has vociferously challenged. But those of us who have worked closely with Bergman over the years know him as one of the premier reporters of his time. (I've collaborated with him on and off since 1972, at Rolling Stone magazine and the Center for Investigative Reporting, as well as on televised reports for "20/20," "60 Minutes" and PBS, and also as co-lecturers at the University of California).

A dogged, rough character who will go almost anywhere in pursuit of his story, Bergman also is a committed intellectual who has made a mission of spreading awareness of what he calls the "grammar of television" to as large an audience as possible. In this way, he's also an activist, one who believes in using the media to reveal how power is exercised, in the pursuit (though he is far too gruff and macho to ever admit this, even to a friend) of truth and justice. I interviewed him Thursday, a few hours before the Washington premier of "The Insider."

How are you?
I'm pretty good, now that Mike [Wallace] has surrendered.

Surrendered?
Yeah, in the New York Times yesterday. He said that he's been hearing from people that the movie is pretty good and he doesn't look so bad after all. And he's decided that he's now at peace.

Zeroing in on Mike for a minute ...
Mike has given up.

Yeah, I want to get to that. But, just matching movie with reality for a little bit here -- did his "I'm with you, Don" quote in the movie [implying Wallace's complicity with his boss, Don Hewitt, in withholding the tobacco story] really happen?

No.

OK, so that would be one of the events that captures what you call "the emotional and philosophical honesty" of the film?
Night Fever" movie to campy clothes and blockbuster dance numbers.
By Gavin McNett
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Look, there's many things in the film that did not happen, and in fact, much of the film is the reconstruction of a time line. So that if you watch it closely as to certain developments, it's not logical.

I said to Michael Mann, "What is this?" And he said it's not a documentary. It's a dramatization of the events. And it's a very effective -- in my opinion -- vehicle for expressing both the emotional -- particularly the emotional -- and psychological aspects of doing this kind of work and being in this kind of situation.

If it had been done in the chronological order as a documentary, I doubt anybody would watch it. It would be like what the CBS lawyers said to me when they signed off and released me to work on this movie. They said -- to paraphrase them -- "Have fun working on the movie. We know it's a very complicated story where there's no death or violence, so it's unlikely ever to be made."

Looks like they were wrong.

I guess.

I would assume one of those philosophically honest aspects was the fear that seems to have been the galvanizing emotion behind Mike and Don's decision to initially side with the corporate guys. I'd like to hear you talk about that, that corporate big-foot possibility.

Well, I mean the bottom line in all of this is that the company came over to news division and said, "Whether you believe them or not, what you guys are doing is going to result in a tobacco company owning CBS."

Did you believe that?

No.

And so they were ... blackmailing?

The presentation that was made by the general counsel was very, very persuasive, and it did not truck any dissent.

I see.

You couldn't ... if you said something, various questions were raised and [the corporate counsel] just kept saying, "No, that won't make any difference and that won't make any difference" and so forth.
And so in terms of what went on with Mike and Don, they were sort of, if you will ... they say they were sort of overwhelmed.

The general counsel presented it with the veneer that there would be a three-week period where this was all going to be considered by outside counsel. It wasn't permanent. Yet certain things happened in the following week that convinced me that that was just bullshit -- including them ordering me out of [whistle-blower Jeffrey] Wigand's house when I went back to him to sort of fact-check things.

The second thing that was going on here that was different from whatever Mike or Don or anyone else was considering was that I'm the one who had the intensive personal contact with Wigand and his family over a long period of time. So I'm the one who has to bear, if you will, the personal, emotional price of what this might mean for him. As well as the ethical question of having done a lot to try to get him to tell his story and help him tell his story.

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So you'd invested yourself.

Invested? I was in a situation where -- if I had, for instance, gone public and denounced what was going on, I endangered revealing my source. So I was caught in a situation where even if I did go public, I realized -- being, as Morley Safer liked to point out to me, "just a producer" -- I could easily be damaged from behind by my colleagues saying, "Well, he's off the reservation, and there are all kinds of other factors here that he doesn't even know about."

And what would that have done? It wouldn't have helped Wigand's credibility. That's for sure. So, it was a difficult balancing act at that point. But there's no question that Mike and Don, from the period of these first meetings until the middle of October, which would be two weeks after quote "the final decision," had no intention of ever making any of this public, had no intention of lifting a finger to help Wigand. Just the opposite. The company had said, "Don't go near him, don't help him."

It's only when they realized that if they cut Wigand loose -- which is what they had done -- that the story itself, that is, the substance of what he had to say about Brown & Williamson, was going to come out anyway.

So they were going to lose the story -- part of which appeared on the front page of the Wall Street Journal -- and eventually the story would come out that they killed the story. So that's when they began maneuvering. Don began maneuvering to figure out a way to do "a censored version." Which is not accurately portrayed in the movie. But it's a complication that's very difficult to explicate.

It sounds like when it became clear that others were going to get the story and he was going to lose the story, Don's journalistic chops kicked in.
To a certain extent. But there was the problem of how to spin it. At that point, assuming that more of the story came out, and my reporting back to them that Wigand was now talking to the Wall Street Journal, it would come out eventually that they had killed the story.

And why did Wigand start talking to the Wall Street Journal?

Well, because he was no longer obligated just to talk to us. And because, in the middle of August, he had put his name on the witness list for ABC and their libel suit. And then ABC folded. So he was hanging out there to dry anyway by ABC already, and their lawyers. And so reporters were calling him. Byron Levin of the L.A. Times was calling him, Alex Friedman was calling him. And he would say to me, "Should I talk to these people?" And I said, "No, no. We're going to do the story. Don't talk to them." And then when we're not doing the story, he calls me and says, "Should I talk to this woman?" And I said, "I guess you should, because we're not doing the story."

It seems you had to go through this difficult personal transformation from the journalist who has managed whistle-blowers all your career to being one yourself.

In a manner of speaking, my final act as a whistle-blower in this is the movie. Because, in the movie, it's clear I leaked the story to the New York Times that made it all public. You know, so that is true. The other thing that's happened is that - and this is a matter of luck and the fact that a lot of people stood up and did the right thing -- is that the movie undermines any attempt to simply spin this as an anomaly.

The reality is, inside the business -- especially the network television news business -- it's self-censored, mostly. And when push comes to shove, it's censored. And that's when it has to deal particularly with stories that involved institutions that are the same size or larger -- private institutions, public institutions, governments, spy agencies -- they're all fair game. But in the world where multinational megacorporations are the new and growing power center, don't expect to see much critical coverage on network television.

The fictional treatment reveals that structural reality. Is that really what you're proudest of in this film?

I'm proudest for Michael Mann and Eric Roth, and the people involved in making the film, that they were actually able to
Night Fever" movie to campy clothes and blockbuster dance numbers.

By Gavin McNett
[11/04/99]

get this film not only made, but distributed.

In Hollywood film history, it's hard to think of another political-economic critique of a major industry like the media.

Yeah. I don't think that this is what I would call an in-depth political critique. It's not a documentary or a polemic. But through the structure that Michael Mann has chosen to tell the story -- which is really about two people -- those concepts are the overarching theme.

Michael wasn't trying to make a pseudo-documentary. So he's not looking for complex pieces of information that he's going to throw into one fact. There was some criticism in the New Yorker, for instance, and arguments that I had with him, you know -- "What about the criminal investigation? What about the Tisch family? That's not explained in the movie."

But it's a story, it's a movie. I think everyone will agree who sees it, no matter whether you like the movie or not, the movie makes you uncomfortable. It makes you psychologically, emotionally uncomfortable because of the level of tension that's maintained for so long.

More like a play.

And the acting of Russell Crowe is just phenomenal. You get the sense of Wigand, of an average American with various neuroses, trying to make it and being confronted with these objective realities.

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Did you ever think your life would be a movie?

[Laughs.] Only when I took the wrong drug.

What happened was, normally in these situations, in the network television world, when they happen, the usual progression -- and there were a lot of unusual things here from the beginning, such as they were trying to kill it even before it got broadcast -- is that the producer walks the plank. And given the structure of the organization, that's how you know that, in fact, the on-camera person is not the real reporter.

So in this situation, what's first of all unusual is that I survived it. I mean, if you look at it from one perspective, by the time the story got on the air and shortly thereafter, I could've had anything I wanted at CBS News.

The reason you survived is that you had a long and valuable career there, and they weren't going to cash it in just yet.

Well, they were ready to cash it in. I don't know. I mean, if Mike Wallace is to be believed, he told me one day not to come to the office because Don Hewitt was going to fire me. That happened a number of times.

So the reality is that a lot of other people did things which are not explained in the movie. They just sort of happened in the movie. And because they did things, it changed the lay of the land. And because I was in a sense lucky enough to survive -- and by survive I mean survive with my job, survive with my reputation -- I then felt obligated, now that Wigand is taken care of, to make it clear what the issues were here.

Now, it's unfortunate that, in the movie-making process, a lot
Chris O'Donnell and Renee Zellweger face off in a tale that sets love against lucre.

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"Portraits Chinois"
Helena Bonham Carter dazzles in a lilting French relationship comedy.
By Charles Taylor [11/05/99]

"The Bone Collector"
With a knick-knack, paddy-wack, Phillip Noyce makes this "Bone" a dog.
By Stephanie Zacharek [11/05/99]

Sharps & Flats
Sporty Spice breaks out of the pack. Who knew Mel C was an L.A. rocker at heart?
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Stayin' alive -- barely
Broadway reduces the complex, ambivalent "Saturday

I think that this film will make it more difficult for anybody to use the concept of tortious interference ever again, to interfere with a story being fully reported.

And I think this story will make it very difficult for anybody to believe ever again that a network television news organization does not take commercial consequences into consideration before they will do a story, or how it influences what reporting they will do. So at least those issues are on the table.

This is consistent with your personal agenda over the years, to deconstruct the grammar of television.

Network television news is never going to do a story showing the audience what goes into doing a magazine segment on "60 Minutes."

So in many ways, this film is surfacing in almost an educational way what you've been a student of in your own career for 20 years, and you've been frustrated finding a way to get this out.

What is out is -- Mike Wallace didn't go out and do the ground-level reporting to do the Hezbollah. He points out in retort that there is another guy, Jim Hogan, who will actually be at the screening tonight, an old friend of mine, who we hired as the leg man to go first. I went second. And Mike went third. That's the way the business works. The audience
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Let's talk about you and Mike. Has there been any reconciliation personally?

I have to put it this way. The first story, the first shoot, in 1983, something goes wrong. Mike takes me out in the parking lot and reams me out in front of everybody. That's how our relationship began. And it appears that's how it's ending. Except this time, he can't order me into the parking lot.

So how does that make you feel?

I was sad that... Well, I felt a number of different ways. He started screaming a year and a half ago. He refused to take my advice a year and a half ago to stop screaming and to try to have a rational discussion with the people involved. He ignored it. He became vindictive and abusive and would not listen. So I decided I wasn't going to talk to him.

I waited six months, I set up a meeting with him to help open up communication. I felt we accomplished something at that meeting. It took place in early February of this year. Four months later, he's back at it, talking about the meeting that we had, this private meeting, and spinning it so it looks like I'm coming on my hands and knees...

... asking for a job? That's what they had in Brill's Content.

They never asked me about it.

That piece basically says, Lowell is trying to make himself the star of this.

Here's the irony in all of it. Twenty-one years a network television news producer, someone is trying to tell me that I'm trying to get too much credit? Anybody who reports on this and asks Mike Wallace, "Haven't you been getting the credit for the work of other people for however many years?" he'll respond, "Well, I wrote a book, and in the book, there's four paragraphs about my producers."

So, in a very blunt way, this is simply a matter of projection, psychologically?

He just said it the other day, he said, "The problem with Lowell isn't that he has penis envy, it's microphone envy." I mean, he's nuts.
Where were Morley, Harry, Andy and Ed? Ed just barely appeared and then disappeared. Why were they cut out?

I don't know why they were cut out of the movie. It's not a documentary. Morley's role in this is public record. He denounced me and Mike publicly. And then later I asked him, "How can you say these things and not have called me even or talked to me?" He said he didn't need to talk to me because I was Mike's producer and you talk to Mike. That gives you an idea of the class relationship.

And Ed was briefed on this before it all became public, and his reaction to me was he wanted it all to go away. Leslie Stahl didn't know until it became public. She's been the most stand-up. And [Steve] Croft didn't know anything until it became public, and he said nothing until the piece actually, eventually, got on the air. And then he said, "What's the big controversy? We put the piece on, didn't we?" So, I think I said at the time that during the roughest period, no correspondent called to wish me luck.

Does Don come through accurately as the Don Hewitt you know, and as the man who built "60 Minutes," in this film?

No.

So what is lacking for people to really understand and appreciate him? Is there another movie to be made?

No. The movie is not about Don Hewitt and Mike Wallace and "60 Minutes." That's not the central focus of the movie. It has become the central focus of the publicity, because Mike Wallace has chosen to go ballistic without seeing the movie. It's not a good idea to review movies that you haven't seen. You wind up doing what Mike did yesterday in the New York Times. You should say, "Yeah, well maybe I'll wait until I see it."

So now that everybody will see it, what will be your future with the "60 Minutes" people?

I don't know. I don't have any future.

You don't have any intention of getting back together with them in any way?

There's a movie coming out tonight. There's been this huge public thing, there's an article in today's Newsday, you know,
with Vern Gay, where he quotes [my wife] Sharon as saying its hard to think of how we would get back together. As far as I'm concerned, there are certain issues here, and they're issues that the rank-and-file people at "60 Minutes" know are true.

I have made no effort, and I will make no effort, to go to work for "60 Minutes." I was asked to get involved in "60 Minutes II." I agreed to try and do that. Mike and Don put the kibosh on that. And that was over a year ago, and now I'm off on another incarnation. I've got a New York Times job, and I've got a four-hour documentary coming for PBS. And I may do a book just simply to lay a lot of this out so that it's not subject to the kind of disinformation and smear which is starting to happen. But other than that, I'm overwhelmed. I've got a lot going on.

At the end of the day, do you think it's possible for a person working in the media to actually make things better in the world, or do you feel that ...

Give me a break. I can't answer a question like that.

Are you an optimist or a pessimist, Lowell?

I'm an asshole. You know that.