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**Photo Editing, Collaborating and the Photojournalism Process:  
A Reflection**

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**Photo Editing, Collaborating and the Photojournalism Process:  
A Reflection**

**by**

**Shelby Alexandra Knowles**

**Report**

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## **Abstract**

### **Photo Editing, Collaborating and the Photojournalism Process: A Reflection**

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Abstract: The photojournalistic process is a collaborative effort between photographers, editors and reporters. This report explores my process as a photographer and photo editor tasked with coordinating with reporters to create a journalistic story that represents written and visual work equally.

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It's a collaboration. It's a vision. It's a plan.

Editing, regardless of the medium, requires special attention to detail, meticulous planning and visual forethought. As a photo editor and sole photographer for two Master's Reports, these qualities were vital throughout my process. Prior to this experience, I worked as a photo editor and a photographer at news organizations where I would fluctuate between the two roles. A photo editor that sorts, gathers other photographer's work, and envisions long-form projects beforehand; but also a photographer when the newsroom needed an immediate responder.

These long-form projects required an on-call photographer ready for last minute responses, but also a photo editor to communicate with reporters and understand their vision for their story.

It's a delicate balance of tasks. A photographer shouldn't dictate the story, but should be a vital component to the story's narrative flow. The photo editor should have a specific plan, but be ready for adjustments and allow for flexibility.

### **When Coal Leaves Texas**

For the first project, I collaborated with Kaulie Lewis, a Master of Arts in Journalism candidate, who is reporting a story about the closure of coal plants and mines in Texas and their impacts on local communities. Elgin, Texas, a small town located 30 minutes outside of Austin, was home to a mine owned and operated by Luminant, one of the largest energy companies in Texas. The closure of that mine and related power plants led to the loss of almost 300 jobs and highly desirable salaries.

From a visual standpoint, I knew this project would greatly depend on access, repeat visits and locals' input. When the reporter and I initially discussed the project, she

wanted the story to focus on the big picture: energy resources in Texas, chemical makeup of coal and what happens to the economy when mines close. All of which are not easy to visualize.

One of the first steps was to drive around Elgin, the closed mine and the coal production plant, located about 20 minutes from the mine. We wanted to get a sense of the surrounding: how the city interacted with the mine — if at all since the closure — the proximity of the mine to the people, and the general landscape of the area.

All journalistic storytelling requires a variety of narrative and scope: the personal narrative, the local impact, the implications for the state and the global big picture. I consider all of these narratives when determining the visuals for any story.

For Lewis's report, the personal narrative came through after visiting the Elgin's Depot Museum tour guide and local historian, Debbie Wahrmond. We met Wahrmond after walking around downtown Elgin, which still looks remarkably like it did in the 1940s.

"Rows of low brick buildings surround a small square, where the Chamber of Commerce is housed in a red trailer, and the train tracks that first brought passengers to — and cotton from — the town still carry freight trains," according to Lewis' report.

To our luck, Wahrmond was not only a walking history of Elgin, but led the fight against the coal mine coming to her city. "As a longtime landowner in the area — and one directly affected by the mine; a conveyor belt ran through her land, only a few hundred feet from her house, carrying lignite from the Three Oaks [coal] mine to the Sandow [plant] — she said the region used to be known for its trees and vegetation," said Wahrmond, according to Lewis' report.

This longtime resident and activist provided the personal narrative needed for journalistic visual storytelling. As a photo editor, including her personal narrative allows readers to connect more deeply with a situation than they might otherwise. This approach puts a face on the issues. Urban readers may not connect with the story if it only includes photos of dilapidated buildings in small-town America, coal plants off in the distance and aerial photos coal mines.

The local, state and national significance was apparent — the closure of a coal mine wreaks havoc on local economies and clearly indicates changes in the energy industry. These narratives, while more convoluted to visualize, were reasonably straightforward — storefronts, homes in the town, the actual coal mines. It was the personal narrative that needed to be identified and discussed thoroughly.

Lewis's report required more of a basic shot list — who, what, where and when to shoot. First on the list was the coal mine and downtown Elgin. As straightforward as it was, I didn't want the visuals to be straightforward or boring. I decided to make the images of storefronts all square-shaped — a less common shape in the photojournalism world — and make them into a collage to symbolize repetitiveness.

For the lead image, I wanted to combine the coal mine and the city of Elgin into one. To literally and figuratively combine the town. I took a double exposure — one photo superimposed over another photo — of the coal mine with the “Welcome to Elgin” sign that sits downtown.

Ultimately, the biggest challenge with Lewis' story was access to the coal mine. Luminant never returned our calls and the premise of the story was about the mine's closure. So, even if we had gotten in, the mine would no longer be active and would be visually less interesting.

Following Debbie's activism, from the resistance towards the opening of the mine to her follow through after its closure, was a strong, compelling, stand-alone narrative. Focusing on her and the city of Elgin will grab the reader's attention and illustrate the complete story.

### **Off Script**

In the second project, Taylor Jackson Buchanan explores how an alarming number of youth have been victims of sexual violence. But parents, teachers and other adults are hesitant to engage in meaningful conversations with kids about sex and sexuality. A group of Austin-area teenagers are stepping into the void. The group, called Changing Lives, devised a play about healthy relationships and consent, and they are bringing these messages to their peers. Their work as student activists offers a window into one form of peer-led prevention with promising potential for change.

Compared to Lewis' story, Buchanan's report had the opposite dilemma: the personal narrative was apparent, but the wider implications were harder to visualize. The students involved were available and excited about our project. We started by narrowing down the 25 students who participated in the play to one who exemplified the overall story. Who can speak about the heart of the play, but also represent the uptick of youth activism? Who has personally dealt with the #MeToo movement, but also understands the wider implications of the movement? We were asking a lot of a 16-year-old.

Luckily, Olivia Benavidez, a freshman in high school, exemplified these qualities and was the lead in the play, putting her in the forefront of the play and our story.

However, the story needed to expand beyond the play. How could people viewing the story connect with these high school students, but also with the bigger movement of

student activism and #MeToo? How could I, as the photographer and photo editor, get outside of this personal narrative and visualize its importance to a local, state and national audience?

This took a little more creative — and some counterintuitive — thinking. To visualize the larger context of student activism, I attended the March for Our Lives and other marches and rallies involving local students. The March for Our Lives, led by students for students, signified the larger significance of student activism and the importance of “peer-led prevention with promising potential for change,” a guiding narrative of Buchanan’s report.

Counterintuitively, in order to expand the story beyond the play, I dove into the life of Olivia, the star of the play. By zooming in, instead of zooming out, I was able to further personify her story and look at her day-to-day life. This type of storytelling, finding the guiding personal narrative, allows viewers to put themselves in the subject’s shoes. They can see her getting ready for school, riding the bus, her friendships, her after-school activities and everything involved in her “ordinary” day to day life. But she deals with consent issues throughout these day to day experiences. She discusses why this play is important to her story as a young woman and how theatre is an outlet for student activism.

At the beginning of the project, Buchanan and I decided the final version of the project would be an audio slideshow. We wanted to combine the students’ voices — since that was a theme of her story — and visuals of the play, the actor’s day-to-day life and the audience’s reception/reactions. Since the play was performed in a wide variety of places, the lighting and surroundings varied greatly. In cases like that, I found it’s best to edit photos as black and white in order to keep consistency. When lighting situations vary

greatly, the viewer can become distracted by the variations of light and miss the focal point of the photos.

Both stories required meticulous attention, extensive planning and creative forethought. The role of a photo editor is to direct visuals, anticipate changes and bring creative direction to the story. As a photographer, I have to use my technical skills and creativity to create images worthy of publishing. While many photographers rely on directions from the author of the story, acting as a trustworthy, reliable teammate allows the story to have great visual breadth and a deeper context than standalone images or text.

## Appendix

### Supplemental Materials

*When Coal Leaves Texas* - 25 images

*Off Script* - Video, Audio Slideshow

## **Vita**

Shelby Alexandra Knowles is a photographer, photo editor and journalist from Houston, Texas. Her work, as a photographer and editor, has been featured in NPR, Texas Tribune and several major national publications.

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