

Storytelling with Mapping: Knight Lab StoryMap

Taught by: Claire Lavarreda and Shannon Peifer

GRMN 2102: Prof. Carolin Fuchs

Digital Integration Teaching Initiative

Spring 2026



Northeastern University

NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks

Workshop Agenda

- Best practices and questions to consider before creating your StoryMap.
- Learn about StoryMap as a mode of conveying data and content.
- Demonstrate steps for using Knight Lab's StoryMap.
- Start building!
- **All materials + slides for this module can be found here:**
<https://bit.ly/44V3F90>

For more information, please see: <https://bit.ly/handout-storymap>



Maps' different uses

Maps can convey all sorts of geospatial information that can facilitate different applications:

- Navigational/orientational maps
- Geological/topographical maps
- Political maps
- Thematic maps
- Artistic maps
- Narrative maps



Subway Map from MBTA

Feel free to ask questions at any point during the presentation!



What are the limits?

- Maps reflect the intention of the map-maker and are **inherently limited**.
 - Maps produce **shared interpretations**, and are not expressions of objective spatial relations.
 - Boston is as much a human idea as a physical space, and thus maps both *represent* and *create* reality. See Quincy Langford's ["Maps Are a Tool to Understand the Past and Shape the Future"](#) to explore how maps can create, erase, and reshape.
- The **simplicity** and **clarity** of maps is deceiving, but **artificial clarity** is necessary for the map to be **useful**.



Questions for critiquing maps

- What is its subject?
- Who is/are the map's audience(s)?
- What is its message, argument, or purpose?
- How and when was the map made?
- Who made this map? What choices did they make?

The True Size of Africa

A novel creation in the right spirit against cartographic imperialism by Kai Krause
In addition to the well known social issues of illiteracy and illiteracy, there also should be such a concept as "map literacy", meaning, in sufficient geographical knowledge.

A survey with random American schoolkids let them guess the population and land area of their country. Not entirely unexpected, but still rather unsettling, the majority chose "7-2 billion" and "largest in the world", respectively. Even with Asian and European college students, geographical estimates were often off by factors of 2-3. This is partly due to the highly distorted nature of the predominantly used mapping projections (such as Mercator).

A particularly extreme example is the worldwide misjudgement of the true size of Africa. This single image tries to embody the massive scale, which is larger than the USA, China, India, Japan and all of Europe - combined!

COUNTRY	AREA in 1000 km²
USA	9.629
China	9.573
India	3.287
Mexico	1.964
Peru	1.285
France	633
Spain	506
Papua New Guinea	462
Sweden	441
Japan	378
Germany	357
Norway	324
Italy	301
New Zealand	270
United Kingdom	243
Nepal	147
Bangladesh	144
Greece	132
TOTAL	30.102
AFRICA	30.221

Just for reference:
The Surface of the MCOG

Please note:

The graphical layout of this map is meant purely as a visualization to illustrate the fact that Africa is much larger than almost everyone assumes. Even today's distorted outlines could have been used to make that point, however the table at left is more accurate. <http://www.krause.net/true-size-of-africa/>

Note for instance that the figures in the table for the USA does include Alaska and Hawaii, but they are not even used in the map, as are a handful of other entries (such as Norway and Sweden).

The reason for this is that the map purposely uses the border shapes, as if you are viewing places in Google Maps. Because the mathematical exact depiction, using equal area scaling, would be even more drastic, but would appear highly distorted. I chose to retain the commonly known outlines and proportions to tell the story, even if this conservative size may not overstate.

The actual maps on the right are again the singular message, see some of the countries in their relation to Africa, as well that is quite unfamiliar and easy seen.

It is worth looking at Shary Fuller maps or the Peters equal area projection, among many other beautiful attempts to display geographical information. However other side-by-side comparisons have been made, this is by far not the first and hopefully not the last such map someone should find the best fit of all puzzle pieces in a neutral projection.

Unit then, please do not take it all too literally (where is 1000??) and simply take that one impression with you. Africa... is immense.

© creative commons

No Rights Reserved

This work is placed in the Public Domain

Top 100 Countries

Area in square kilometers, Percentage of World Total
Source: Britannica, Wikipedia, Almanac 2010



From "[Critiquing Maps II](#)", by Shannon Mattern

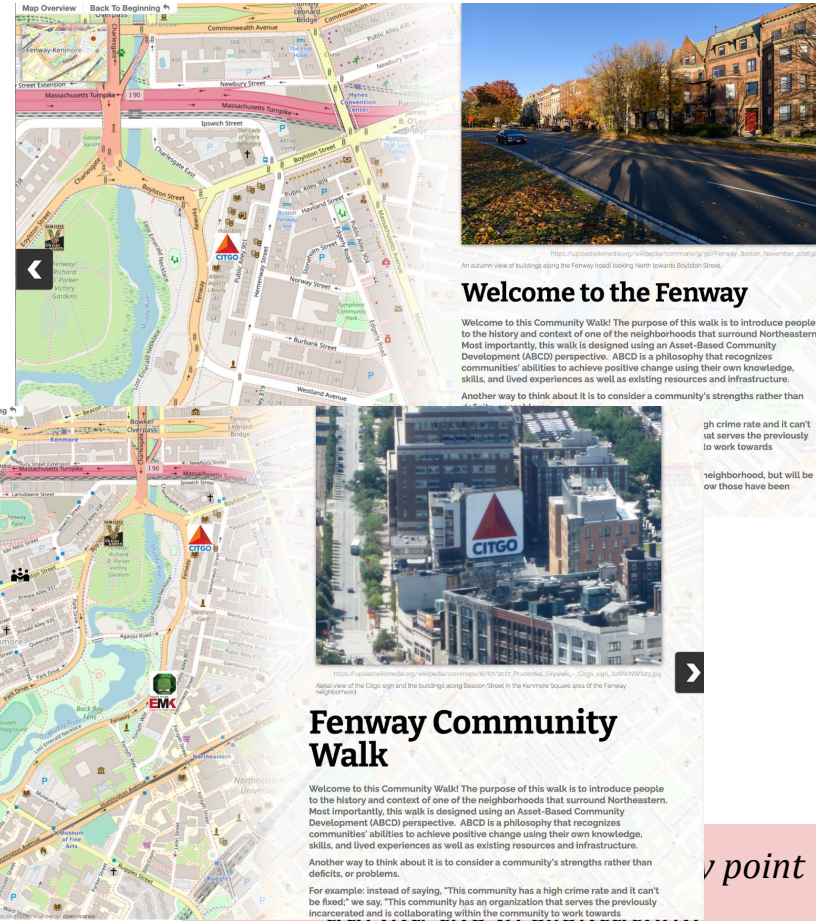
[The True Size of Africa](#), Kai Krause



Northeastern University
NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks

What is a StoryMap?

KnightLab's StoryMap tool allows users to tell narrative stories connected with specific geographic locations.



Why use a map to tell stories?

- StoryMaps help us **render visualized, spatialized, and contextual information about spaces** in the past or today.
 - StoryMaps can be about places you've never been to. The goal is to help users “see” the spaces/places/routes as accurately as possible, and to get a sense of the people and things in the environment.
- Think about StoryMaps as **giving directions**, relating not only direction and **distance** but also **sequence**.



Example Projects Using Maps to Tell Stories

- [“The Black Jazz Heritage Trail of Boston”](#): uses a mix of textual, image, and student-researched location data to map historic Black jazz clubs.
- [“Mapping Shared Spaces: A Visual History of Boston’s Black and Jewish Communities”](#): presents the story of migration of Boston religious communities by following the changing locations of places of worship.
- [“Contemporary Indigenous Spatiality”](#): created by Agléška Cohen-Rencountre (Lower Brule Sioux Tribe) to interrogate settler-colonial epistemologies about water-ways, as well as trace personal and community connections to Rapid Creek and the Mississippi River.



Making a StoryMap



Northeastern University
NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks

StoryMap Best Practices

- Think carefully about the **audience** you are trying to reach with your map. This will impact your language, the order of your points, and the media that you choose.
- Think also about the **tone** of the map: the default for StoryMap can be very upbeat and informal, and that may not match the content you are sharing.
- **Test your map** after you have created it, to make sure that all the narrative points flow and that the language is clear and concise.



Optional: Spreadsheet Template

Make a copy of the StoryMap template below and use it to fill in the different sites you want to map, images you want to include, etc.

StoryMap Spreadsheet Template

Template based on the StoryMap Spreadsheet Template created by Molly Brown, Reference and Outreach Archivist, Northeastern University Library.

For more information about collecting and organizing data for StoryMap, please see:

<https://bit.ly/handout-storymap-spreadsheet>



Data collection: Site

fx | <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126>

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Slide #	Site Name	Site Location	Image URL/File Location	Image Credit	Image Caption	Headline	Historical Profile/First Person Narrative	Citation(s)	Additional Media	Additional Media Caption & Credit
2	Title Slide	n/a	n/a	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126	Freedom House Records, Courtesy of Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections	Back Bay Fens, Boston, Mass.	Walking the Emerald Necklace	This is an introduction to the project that will continue on.			
3	Site 1	Back Bay Fens Community Gardens	42.344888, -71.093221	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20157723	Freedom House Records, Courtesy of Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections	Community garden in Back Bay Fens.	Back Bay Community Gardens	Two men tend community garden in the Back Bay Fens. A public water building can be seen on the left. The Back Bay Fens (also called The Fens, or Fens) is a freshwater marsh and lagoon area within Boston's larger Emerald Necklace park system.			
4											
5											
6											

The slide number can serve as the order in which your sites appear on your map and the site name can be used to label sites on your map.

The site location is used to identify a point on your map where the site is physically located (address or coordinates).



Data collection: Image

fx | <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126>

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Slide #	Site Name	Site Location	Image URL/File Location	Image Credit	Image Caption	Headline	Historical Profile/First Person Narrative	Citation(s)	Additional Media	Additional Media Caption & Credit
2	Title Slide	n/a	n/a	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126	Freedom House Records, Courtesy of Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections	Back Bay Fens, Boston, Mass.	Walking the Emerald Necklace	This is an introduction to the project that will continue on.			
3	Site 1	Back Bay Fens Community Gardens	42.344888, -71.093221	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20157723	Freedom House Records, Courtesy of Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections	Community garden in Back Bay Fens.	Back Bay Community Gardens	Two men tend community garden in the Back Bay Fens. A public water building can be seen on the left. The Back Bay Fens (also called The Fens, or Fens) is a freshwater marsh and lagoon area within Boston's larger Emerald Necklace park system.			
4											
5											
6											

The image URL/File location is useful in keeping track of images of sites. Always credit your images to indicate their origin. Also include a caption describing your image.



Data collection: Narrative and Sources

fx | <http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126>

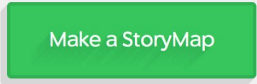
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Slide #	Site Name	Site Location	Image URL/File Location	Image Credit	Image Caption	Headline	Historical Profile/First Person Narrative	Citation(s)	Additional Media	Additional Media Caption & Credit
2	Title Slide	n/a	n/a	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126	Freedom House Records, Courtesy of Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections	Back Bay Fens, Boston, Mass.	Walking the Emerald Necklace	This is an introduction to the project that will continue on.			
3	Site 1	Back Bay Fens Community Gardens	42.344888, -71.093221	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20157723	Freedom House Records, Courtesy of Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections	Community garden in Back Bay Fens.	Back Bay Community Gardens	Two men tend community garden in the Back Bay Fens. A public water building can be seen on the left. The Back Bay Fens (also called The Fens, or Fens) is a freshwater marsh and lagoon area within Boston's larger Emerald Necklace park system.			
4											
5											
6											

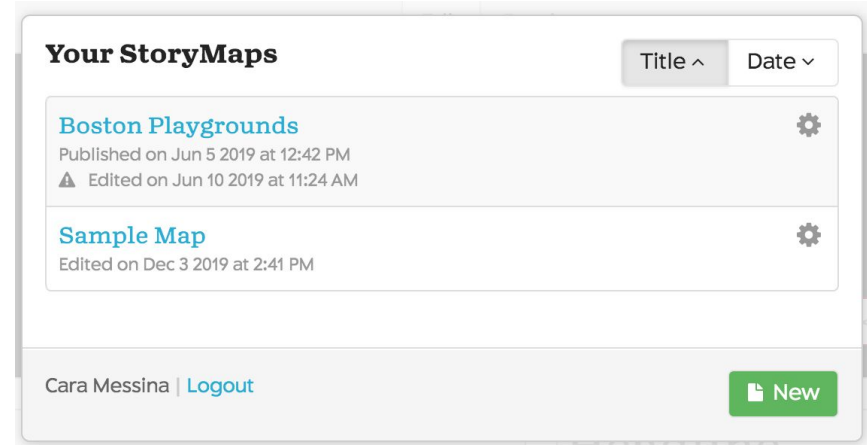
The headline can serve as the official title or label of your site. Including a narrative provides more context as to why your site is important.

Don't forget to cite your sources! Also, you may want to include additional media related to your site (e.g. newspaper clippings, additional photos, etc.).

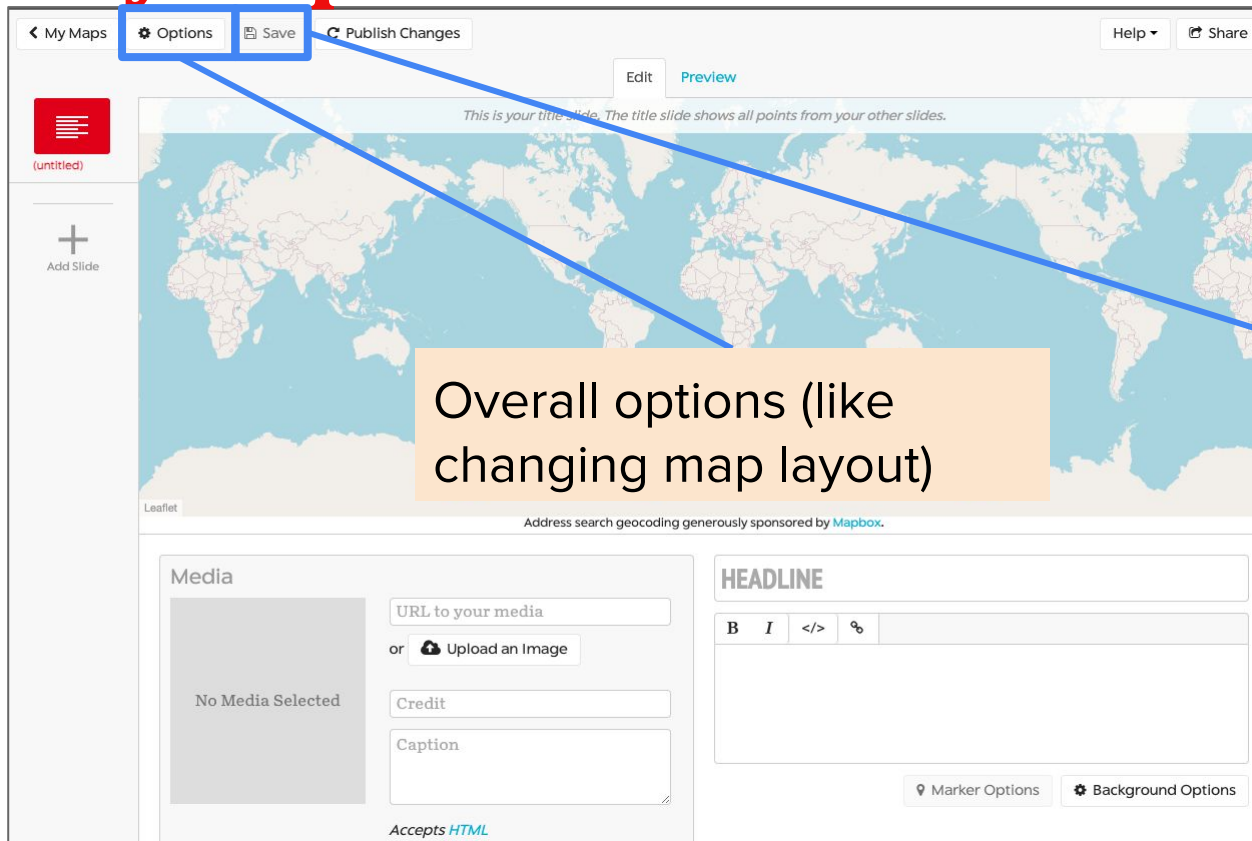


Create a StoryMap

- Go to <https://storymap.knightlab.com/>
- Click “Make a StoryMap.” 
- Either create a new account or sign in through Google.
- Once you’re signed in, click “New Map” (once you have created your map, it will be there for you to work on).
- Name your project.

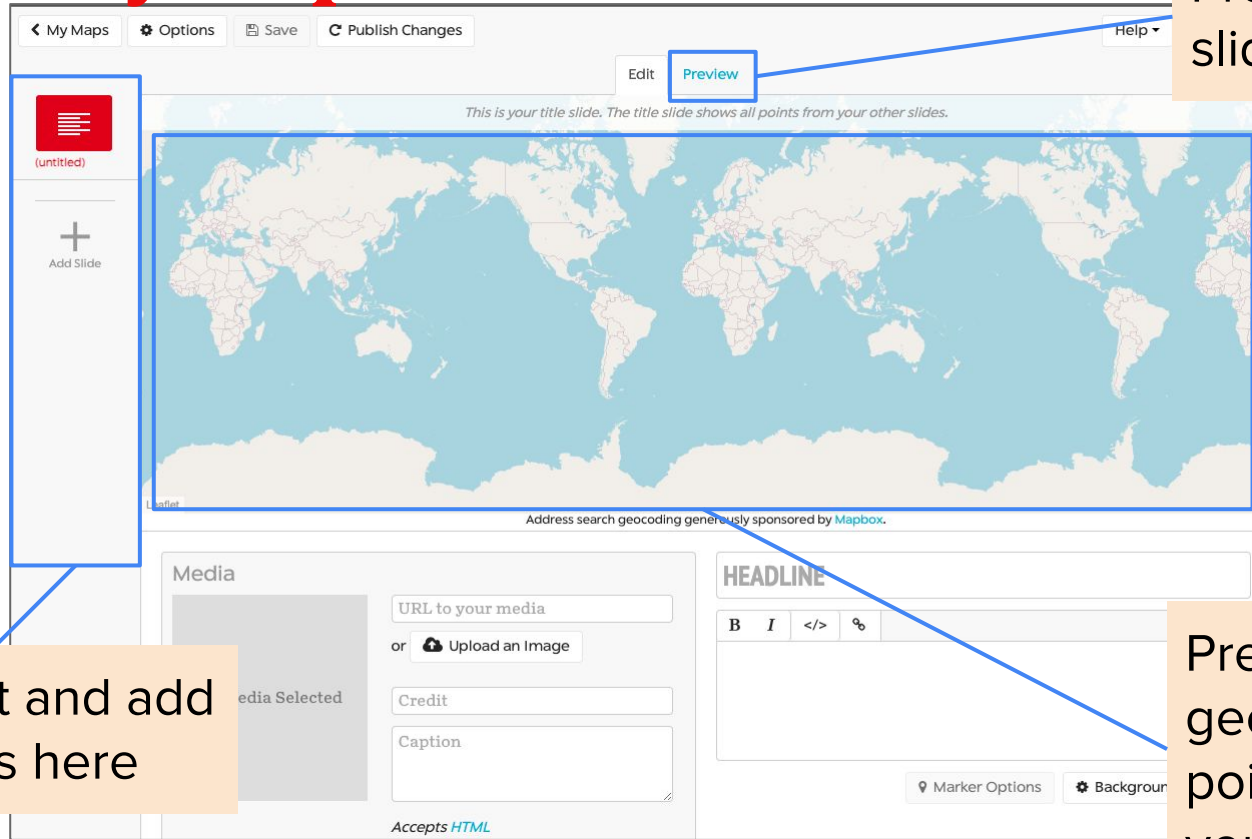


Your StoryMap



Your StoryMap: Slides

Preview your
slides



Check out and add
new slides here

Preview the
geographic
points in all of
your slides



Northeastern University
NULab for Texts, Maps, and Networks

*Feel free to
during the presentation!*

Your StoryMap: Media and Text Boxes

Uploading
photos or
other media!
Document
what you
upload

Title and
content of your
text box

Color or image
for text box
background

The screenshot shows the StoryMap editor interface. At the top, there are navigation buttons: '< My Maps', 'Options', 'Save', 'Publish Changes', 'Help', and 'Share'. Below these are 'Edit' and 'Preview' tabs. The main area displays a world map with a title slide overlay that reads: 'This is your title slide. The title slide shows all points from your other slides.' Below the map, there is a search bar and a note: 'Address search geocoding generously sponsored by Mapbox.' At the bottom, there are two panels. The left panel is titled 'Media' and contains a 'No Media Selected' placeholder, a 'URL to your media' input field, an 'Upload an Image' button, a 'Credit' input field, and a 'Caption' input field. The right panel is titled 'HEADLINE' and contains a text area with formatting options (B, I, </>, and a link icon). Below the headline panel is a 'Background Options' button. A blue box highlights the 'Media' and 'HEADLINE' panels, and a blue line connects the 'Background Options' button to the 'Color or image for text box background' callout.

Media

URL to your media

or Upload an Image

Credit

Caption

Accepts HTML

HEADLINE

B I </> [Link Icon]

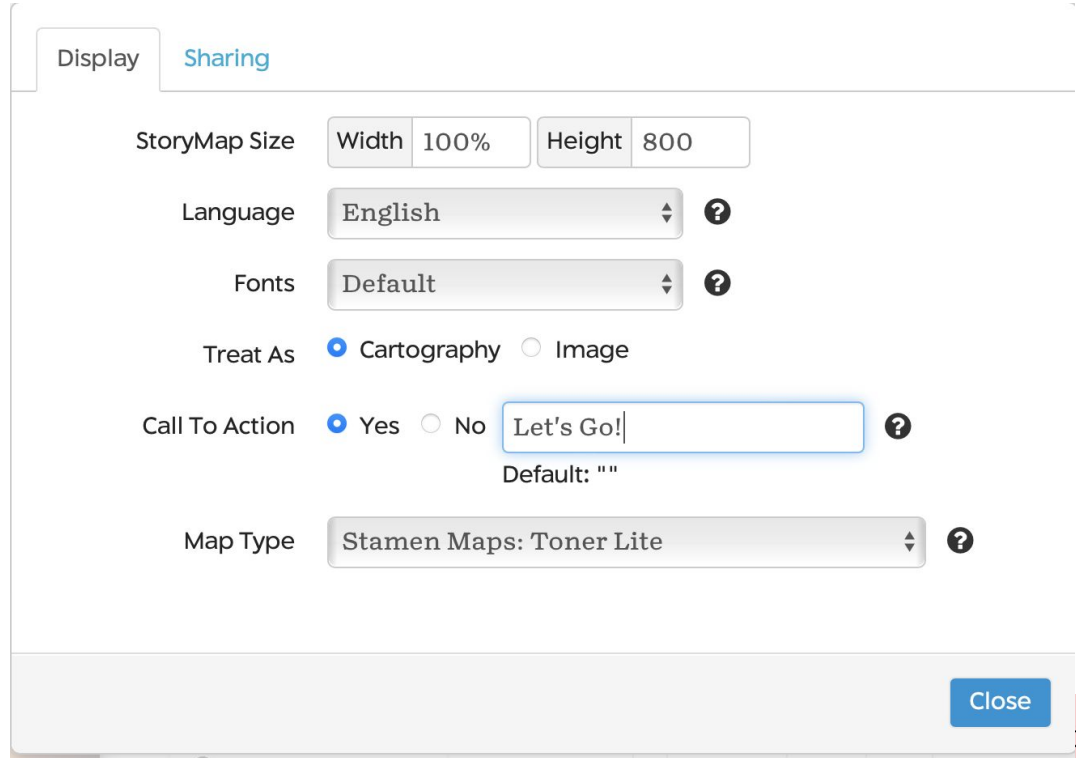
Marker Options

Background Options



Options for designing your map

- The “Options” button in the top left allows you to change the design of your map.
- Customizable options include Language, Fonts, Call to Action, Map Type and more.



The screenshot shows the 'Options' dialog box for a StoryMap. It has two tabs: 'Display' (selected) and 'Sharing'. The 'Display' tab contains several settings:

- StoryMap Size:** Width 100%, Height 800.
- Language:** English (dropdown menu with a help icon).
- Fonts:** Default (dropdown menu with a help icon).
- Treat As:** Cartography (selected radio button), Image (unselected radio button).
- Call To Action:** Yes (selected radio button), No (unselected radio button). A text input field contains 'Let's Go!' with a help icon. Below it, the default is shown as 'Default: ""'.
- Map Type:** Stamen Maps: Toner Lite (dropdown menu with a help icon).

A 'Close' button is located at the bottom right of the dialog box.



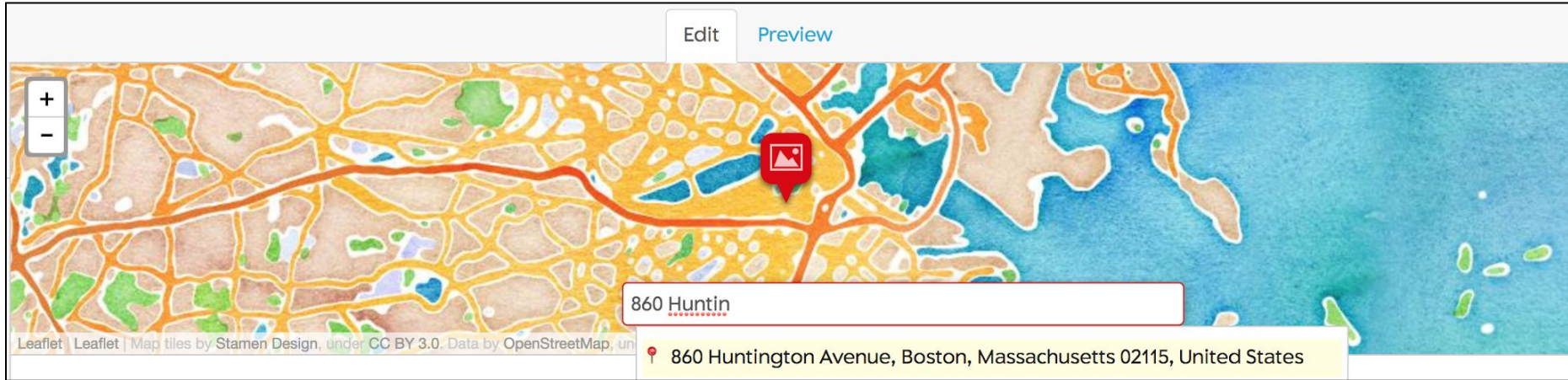
Slides, or map markers

Each slide is a different marker point on your map. Each slide contains:

- Title and text. The text box reads basic HTML.
- A background image or color.
- A map marker, which can be placed by searching for Google Maps locations or by placing the marker manually.
- Media: images, videos, and sound files can be uploaded. Since only *one* media file can be uploaded per slide, you can use the text box's HTML to integrate additional images or other media types.



Add A Location



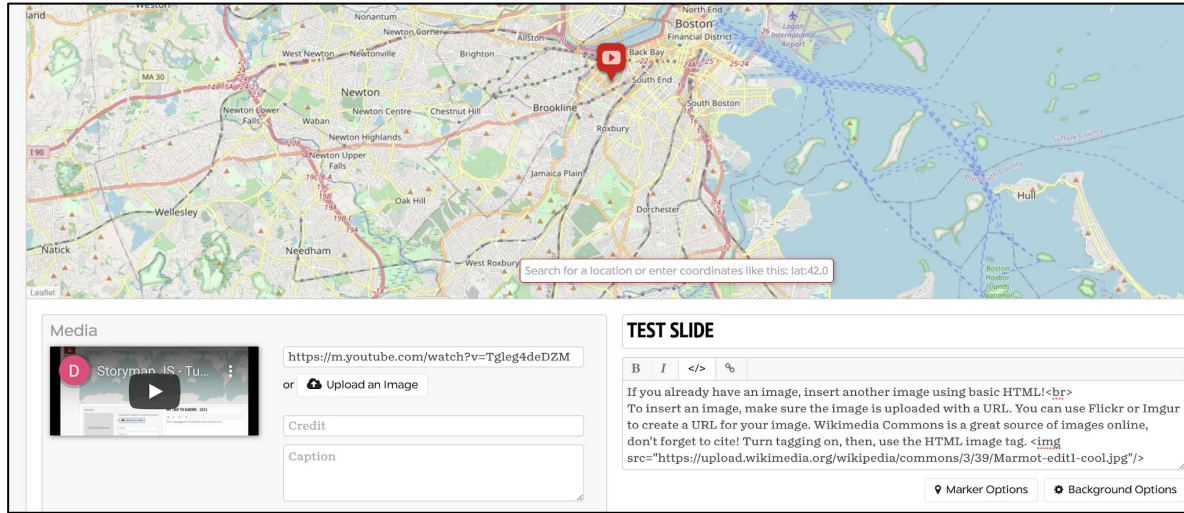
KnightLab StoryMap
uses **Mapbox** to
locate addresses

StoryMap, however, does **not**
always recognize place
names; you might need to
know the **address** or location
of particular structures

You can also **drag**
and drop the map
markers to the
specific location



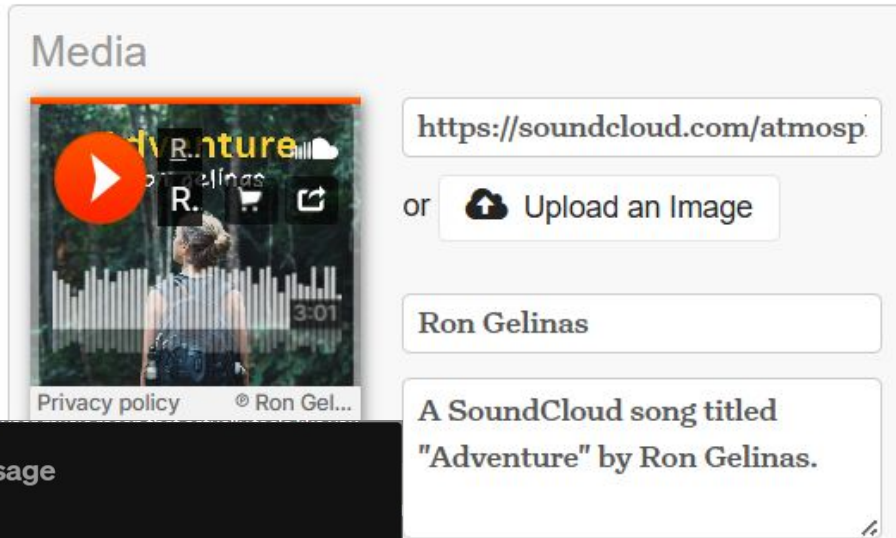
Add Media and Images to a Slide: Upload or URL



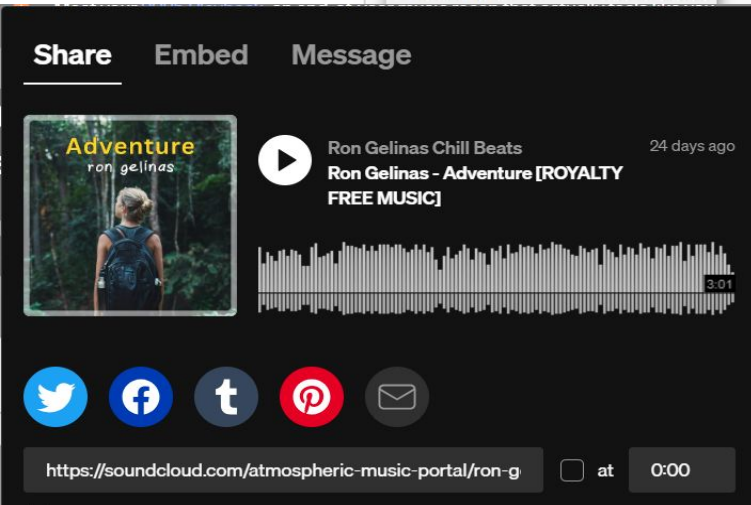
Use “media” to upload files. You can upload an image or put a **URL** of an image OR a video (like a YouTube video). If you want to include your own video, you will first have to upload it to YouTube or other online publisher and copy that link.



Add SoundCloud Music/Audio

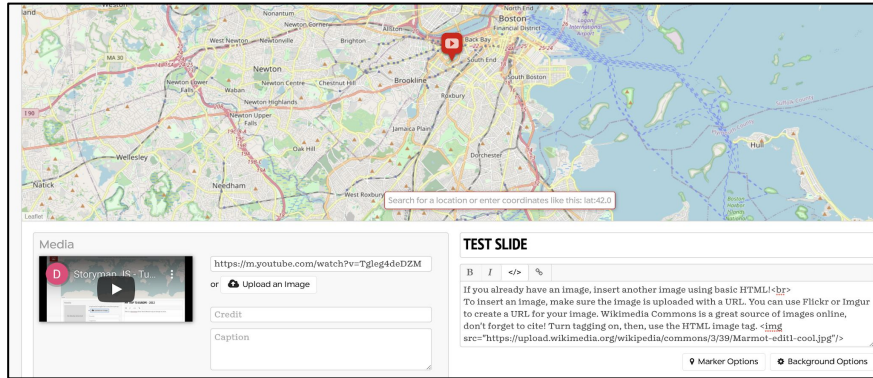


You can also upload music from SoundCloud as long as the audio is (1). Royalty free, or (2). You have permission to use it. To do so, you can copy the “share” link from SoundCloud and paste it into the URL box.



Feel free to ask questions at any point during the presentation!

Add Media and Images to a Slide:HTML



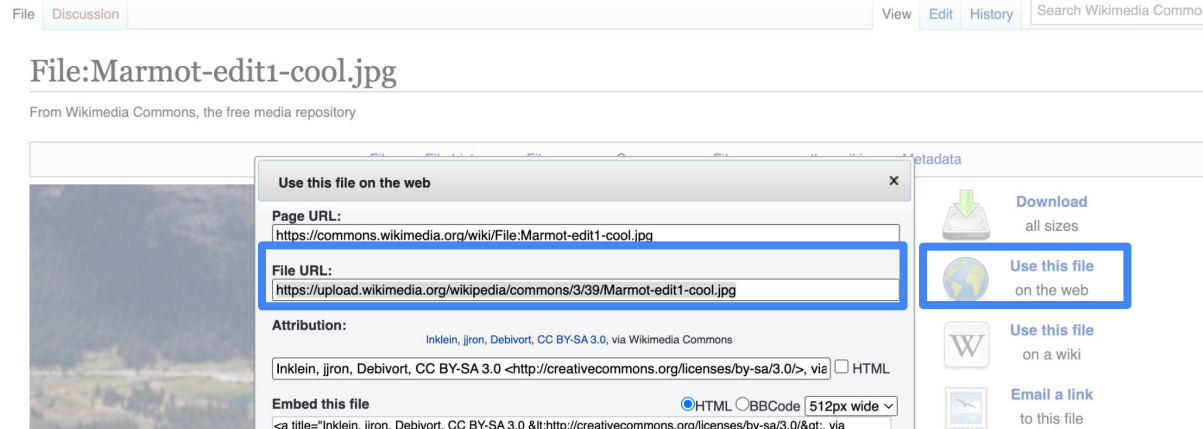
If you have an image or a video in the “media” section, but want to include an image **in the text**, you can! The text box reads basic HTML.

1. Click the `</>` button (turn on HTML)
2. Get a URL of your image. Use Wikimedia Commons to search images by content, and filter by license type and image size. Make sure to use the embed file code, and don't forget to cite the source!
3. Use the HTML `` tag to insert the image.
4. Check the “Preview” to see the image. Smaller image sizes may appear as a thumbnail, so stick to larger image sizes and preview your end result!



Embed codes and image files

If you are adding an image via its URL, make sure that you select the link with **the image file itself**, not just a page with the image on it.



For example, to add an image from Wikimedia Commons, follow these steps:

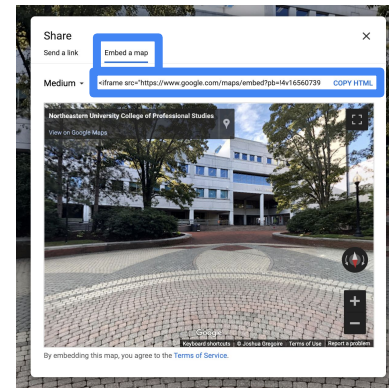
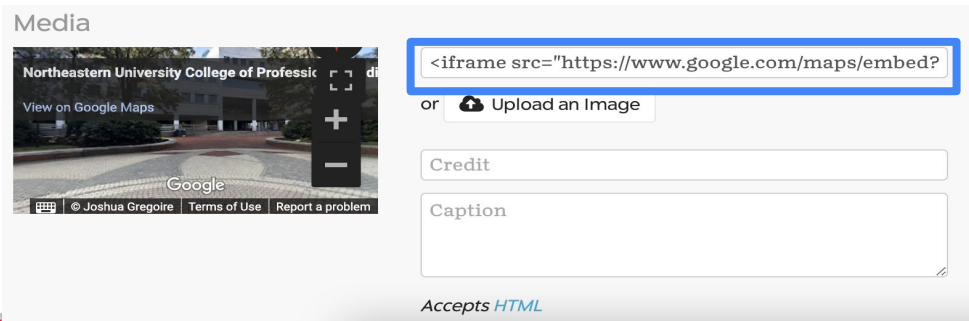
1. Go to "More Details" and choose "Use this file on the web," or just choose "Use this file on the web" if you see that option.
2. Copy the "File URL."



Add Google Street View to a Slide

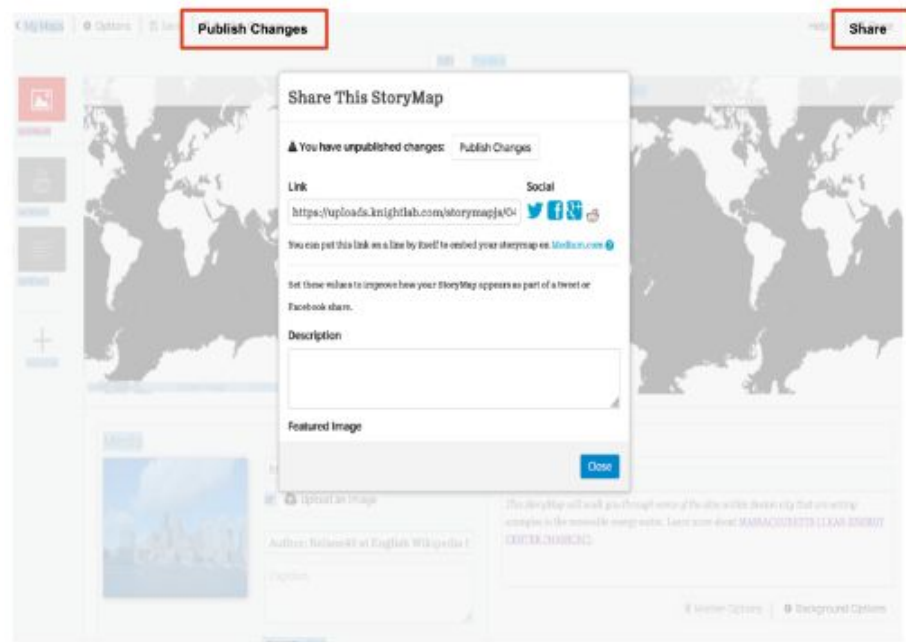
As with other media, you can insert a Google street view map into a slide by entering its **URL**.

- Click “Share or embed image” from the menu in Google Maps, and copy the **HTML** link from the “Embed a map” tab.
 - Make sure the link has the `<iframe src="URL"></iframe>` code (it should automatically, but the map won't work without it!).
- Enter the URL into the “URL to your media” box.



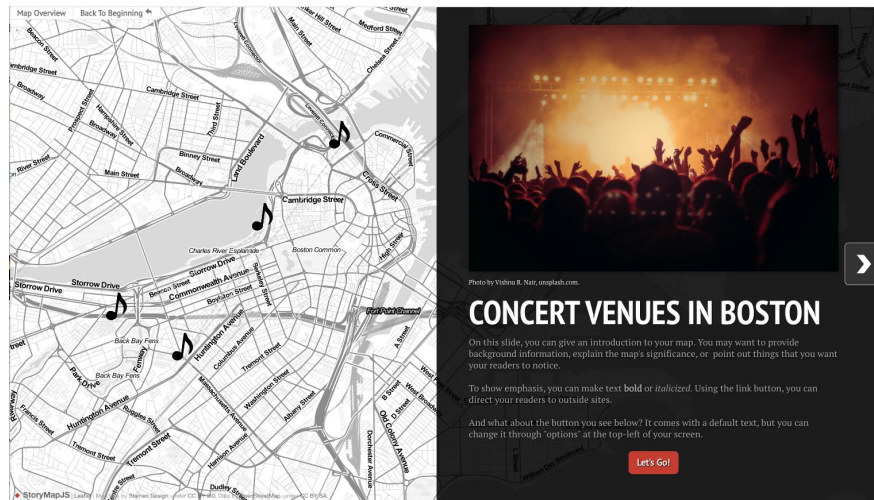
Publish and Share Your StoryMap

- Click the “Publish Changes” button on the top left side on the editing page.
- StoryMap’s “Share” button is in the top right corner.
- You can add a description and feature image here before sharing your StoryMap widely.



StoryMap Demo

- To see StoryMap in action, click on this [Sample Map Link!](#)
- Here you will be able to explore a map custom-made by DITI to highlight your options for creating maps.



Best Practices and Advanced Options for StoryMap



Image sharing and permissions

- It is important to verify that you are allowed to use images before you put them in your StoryMap.
- Search for media that is public domain or shared with permissions that allow re-use.
 - DITI recommends [Wikimedia Commons](#) and DPLA ([Digital Public Library of America](#)).
- Ensure proper credit/attribution is given for all media

For more information on copyright and reuse, please see:

<https://bit.ly/fair-use-handout>



Accessibility in StoryMap (1/3)


Alt-text is a description of a digital image attached to the image file. When you attach an image or video to your StoryMap, add descriptions of any images and videos in the image caption and text box. People that use screen readers are able to hear content you include in image captions and the text box.

Headline


B **I** **</>** **🔗**

Place alt text describing the slide and attached visuals here

Media



`<iframe src="https://www.google.com/maps/embed?pb=!3:`

or  Upload an Image

Place image title and credit here

Place alt text describing the image here

Accepts [HTML](#)



Accessibility in StoryMap (2/3)

Color contrast is one way to make StoryMap accessible. Choosing a higher color contrast palette will make the text more accessible. Avoid using red and green colors for differentiation. StoryMap allows users to customize text color using HTML and the slide background color.

Headline

B I </> %

`Slide Text: Place alt text describing the slide and attached visuals here`

Media



`<iframe src="https://www.google.com/maps/embed" data-bbox="538 692 702 712">`

or  Upload an Image

Image Credit


`Image Caption: Place alt text describing the image here`

Accepts [HTML](#)


📍 Marker Options ⚙️ Background Options

Slide Background

Background Color

 #ffffff

Background Image

 << select an image, or enter an URL

or upload an image to your StoryMap folder.

Choose File... Upload

Close



Accessibility in StoryMap (3/3)

If linking media in the text box of a slide on StoryMap, be sure to use a descriptive link name. Descriptive link names allows users to know the content and context of the link before they navigate it.

Instead of writing “For more information on accessibility in StoryMap, click [here](#).”

Write “For more information on accessibility in StoryMap, please see: **[Handout: Accessibility in StoryMap](#)**.”



Data Privacy

- It's important to pay attention to data privacy when using digital resources
- At its simplest, **data privacy** is a person's ability to control what of their personal information is shared and with whom.
- To help you make informed decisions about interacting with digital tools in ways that honor your boundaries with your data and/or personal information, the DITI has prepared a handout on [Data Privacy](#)



Data Ethics

- Data can render certain communities and their qualities hyper-visible or invisible, as well as reinforce biases.
- It is important to consider what voices are missing from the data or from the archives. Data ethics provide a critical framework for challenging bias in big data, data visualizations, etc.
- To help you engage with and transform your data ethically, the DITI has prepared an handout on [Data Ethics](#).



A Note on HTML

- You can use HTML to have more control over the display and behavior of StoryMap. Look for the “Accepts HTML” language or this symbol: `</>`
- For more information on HTML, please see:
<https://bit.ly/handout-HTML>

Helpful HTML Codes

```
#Change Text Color  
<span style = "color:red">YOUR TEXT  
HERE</span>
```

```
#Add Link in Caption/Credit  
<a href="URL">text</a>
```

```
#Add Image/Media in Textbox  

```

```
#Add Alternate Text to Image/Media  

```



A Note on Save States

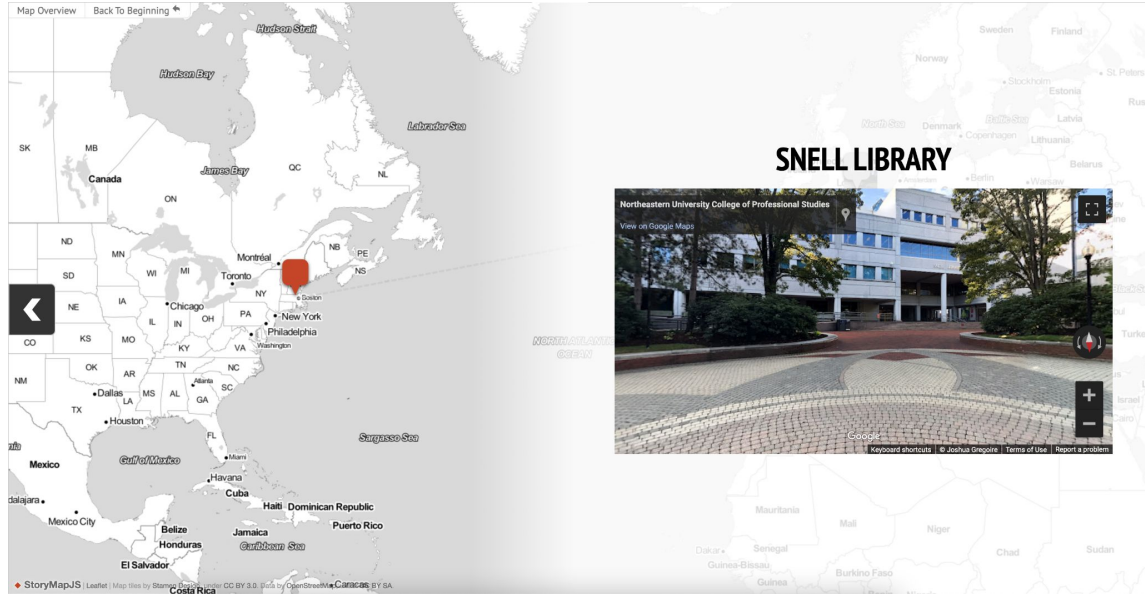
StoryMap does not keep older versions of your project, so once you make and save changes, **you cannot retrieve a previous version.** You can also write over new content if you have your StoryMap open in multiple browser tabs or windows at once.

This is one reason why it is a good idea to plan out your StoryMap in a separate document: if you lose progress, you will have your content saved somewhere else.



A Note on Zoom Levels

StoryMap does not let you set how far zoomed in or out your slides will be. The zoom level is determined automatically according to the distance between your locations.



For Further Exploration

Here are all the links presented in these slides:

<https://bit.ly/handout-storymap>

<https://bit.ly/handout-storymap-spreadsheet>

<https://bit.ly/fair-use-handout>

<https://bit.ly/storymap-accessibility-handout>

<https://bit.ly/handout-HTML>



Thank you!

—**Developed by** Ana Abraham, Chris McNulty, Benjamin Grey, Claire Lavarreda, and Shannon Peifer

—**Taught by** Claire Lavarreda and Shannon Peifer

- For more information on DITI, please see:
<https://bit.ly/diti-about>
- Schedule an appointment with us! <https://bit.ly/diti-meeting>
- If you have any questions, contact us at: nulab.info@gmail.com

