Storytelling with Mapping: Knight Lab StoryMap

Taught by Emily Sullivan & Mel Williams

HIST 2011: History of Capitalism and Business

Professor Malcolm Purinton

Spring 2026

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

Workshop Agenda

- Slides and handouts available at: https://bit.ly/sp26-hist2011-storymap
- Best practices and questions to consider before creating your StoryMap.
- Learn about StoryMap as a mode of conveying data and content.
- Examine how foreign policy and national security can intertwine with mapping.
- Demonstrate steps for using Knight Lab's StoryMap.
- Start building!
- For more information, please see: https://bit.ly/handout-storymap

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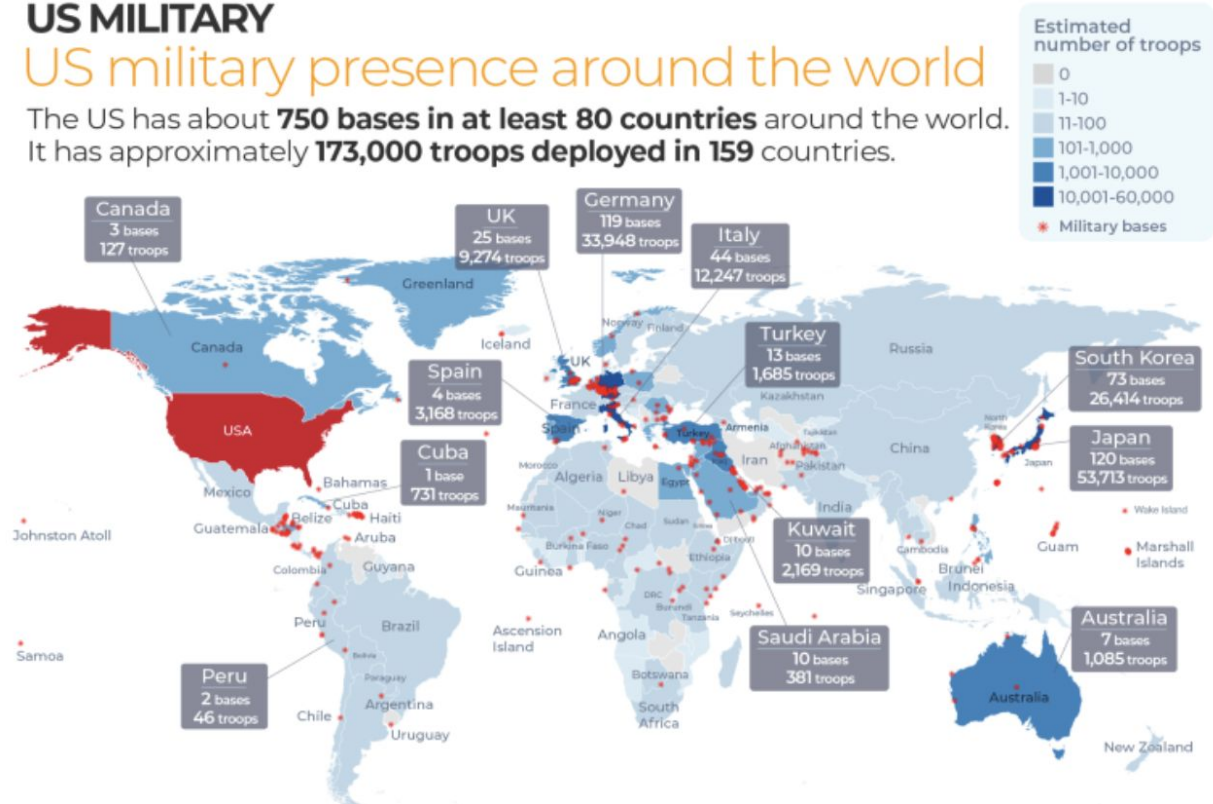
Maps' different uses

Maps convey geospatial information that facilitate different uses:

- Navigational maps
- Geological maps
- Topographical maps
- Political maps
- Thematic maps
- Artistic maps
- Narrative maps

US MILITARY
US military presence around the world
The US has about **750 bases in at least 80 countries** around the world. It has approximately **173,000 troops deployed in 159** countries.

Estimated number of troops
- 0
- 1-10
- 11-100
- 101-1,000
- 1,001-10,000
- 10,001-60,000
- Military bases

Canada
3 bases
127 troops

UK
25 bases
9,274 troops

Germany
119 bases
33,948 troops

Italy
44 bases
12,247 troops

Turkey
13 bases
1,685 troops

South Korea
73 bases
26,414 troops

Spain
4 bases
3,168 troops

Japan
120 bases
53,713 troops

Cuba
1 base
731 troops

Kuwait
10 bases
2,169 troops

Saudi Arabia
10 bases
381 troops

Australia
7 bases
1,085 troops

Peru
2 bases
46 troops

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Source: Al Jazeera, 2021

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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**.

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What is a StoryMap?

KnightLab's StoryMap tool allows users to tell narrative stories connected with specific geographic locations. For example, the following are the first three slides of a [StoryMap on proxy wars in the Cold War](#):

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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**.

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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.
- "[Bases Around the World](#)": interactive map showing US military bases around the world
- "[Military Empires: A Visual Guide to Foreign Bases](#)": a website showing various maps exploring foreign bases around the world
- "[Emergency Shelters Map](#)": a Neighborhood emergency shelter map built by the City of Boston.

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Making a StoryMap

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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.

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Recommended: 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

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Data collection: Site

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).

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Data collection: Image

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.

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Data collection: Narrative and Sources

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

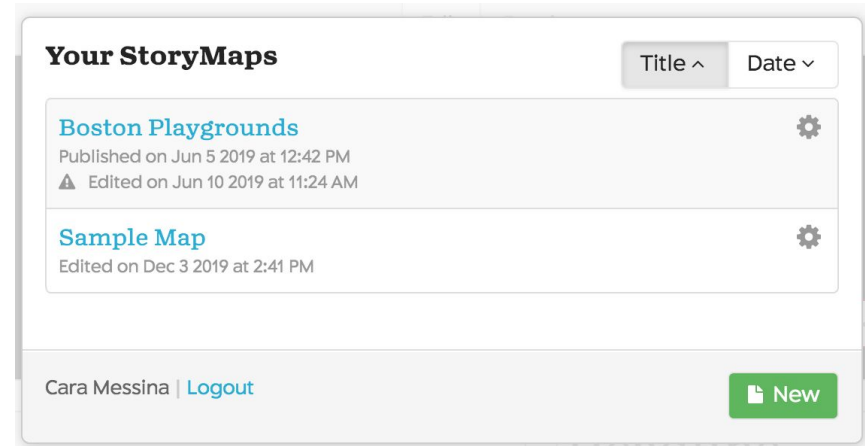|	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
1	Slide #	Site Name	Site Location	Image URL/File Location	Image Credit	Image Caption	Headline	Historical Profile/First Person Narrative	Citation(s)	Additional Media	Additional Media Caption & Credit
2	Title Slide	n/a	n/a	http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20158126	Freedom House Records, 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.
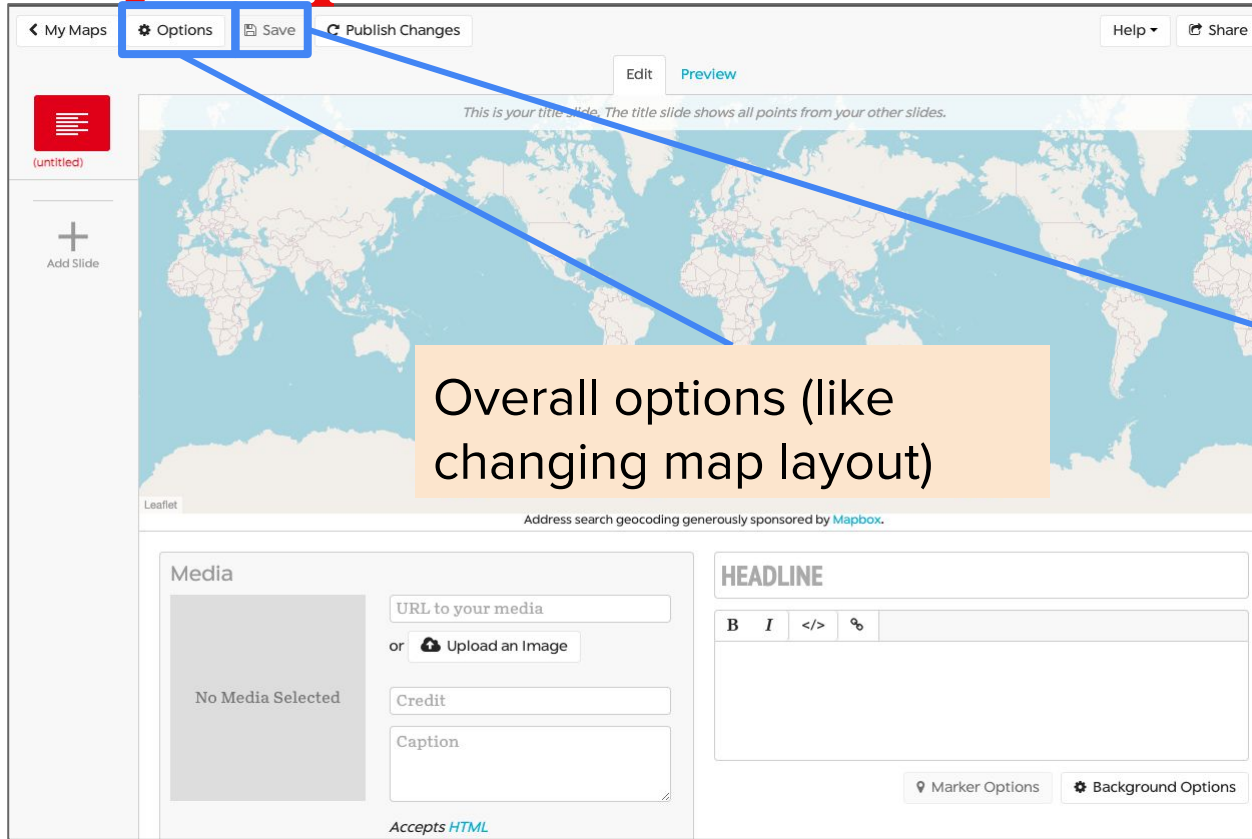
Don't forget to cite your sources! Also, you may want to include additional media related to your site (e.g. newspaper clippings, additional photos, etc.).

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Create a StoryMap

- Go to https://storymap.knightlab.com/

- Click "Make a StoryMap." [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).

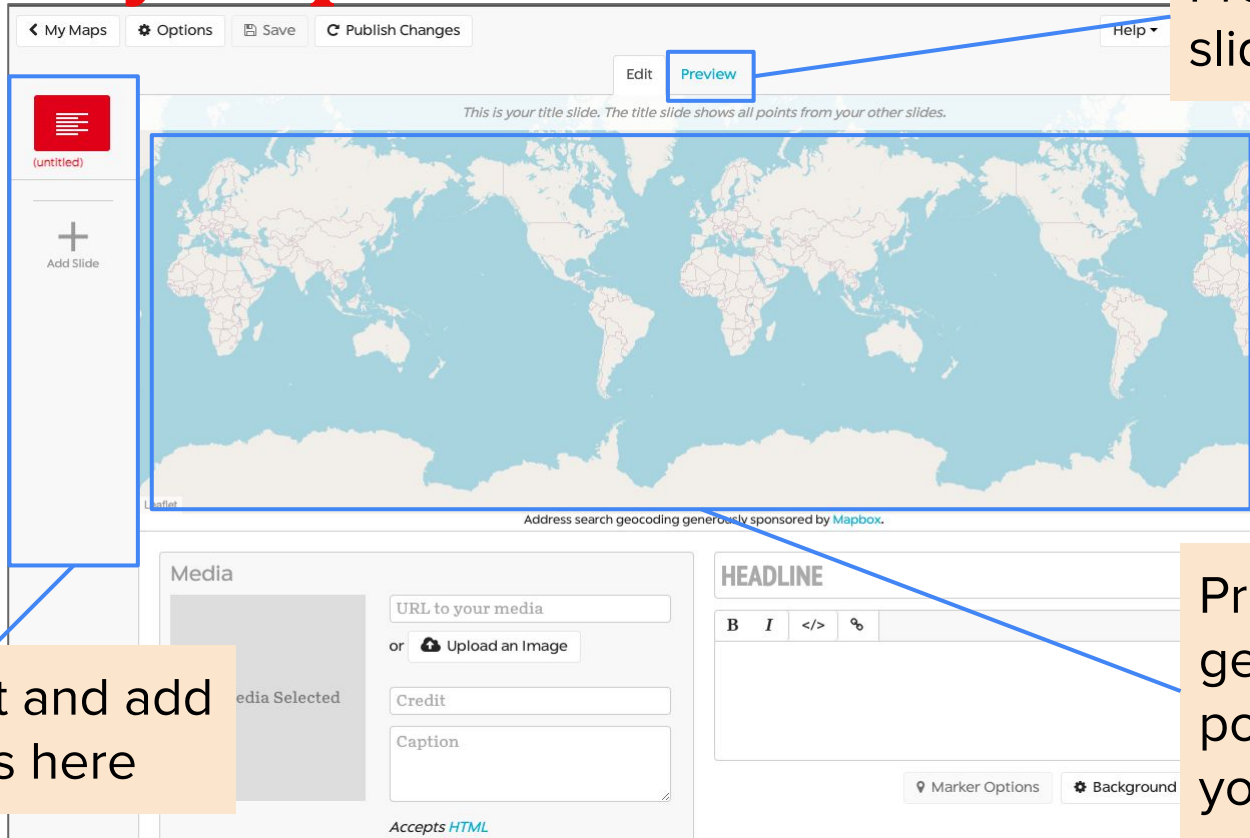- Name your project.

Your StoryMaps
Title ^   Date ⌄

Boston Playgrounds ⚙
Published on Jun 5 2019 at 12:42 PM
⚠ Edited on Jun 10 2019 at 11:24 AM

Sample Map ⚙
Edited on Dec 3 2019 at 2:41 PM

Cara Messina | Logout   New

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

Your StoryMap

SAVE OFTEN!

Overall options (like changing map layout)

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Your StoryMap: Slides

Preview your slides

Check out and add new slides here

Preview the geographic points in all of your slides

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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

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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.

Display   Sharing

| StoryMap Size | Width | 100% | Height | 800 |

Language   English   ❓

Fonts   Default   ❓

Treat As   ● Cartography   ○ Image

Call To Action   ● Yes   ○ No   Let's Go!   ❓
Default: ""

Map Type   Stamen Maps: Toner Lite   ❓

Close

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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.

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Add A Location
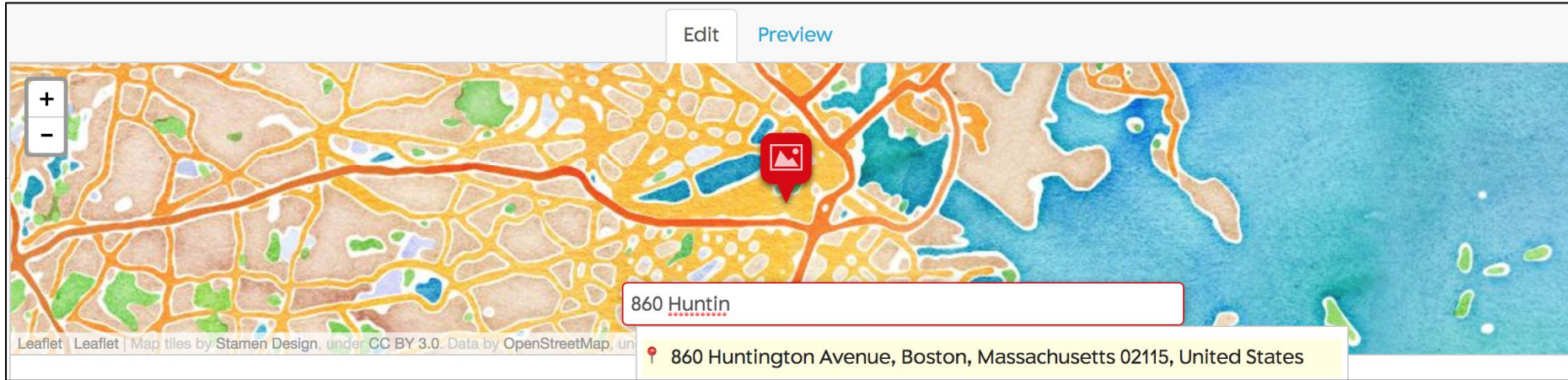
KnightLab StoryMap uses **Mapbox** to locate addresses

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

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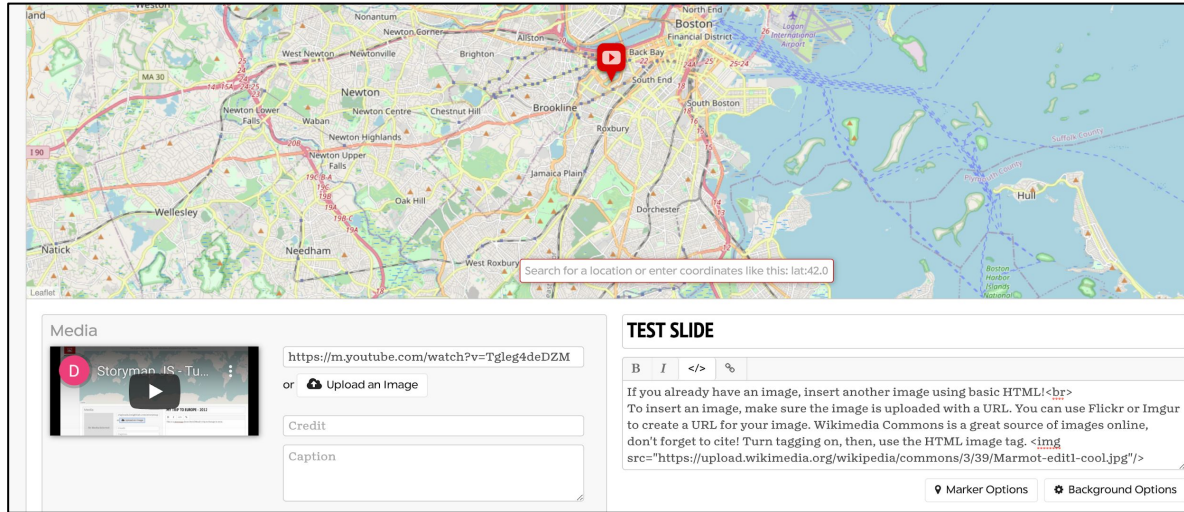
Use "media" to upload files. You can upload an image or put a **URL** of an image OR a video (like a YouTube video). If you want to include your own video, you will first have to upload it to YouTube or other online publisher and copy that link.

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Add Media and Images to a Slide:HTML
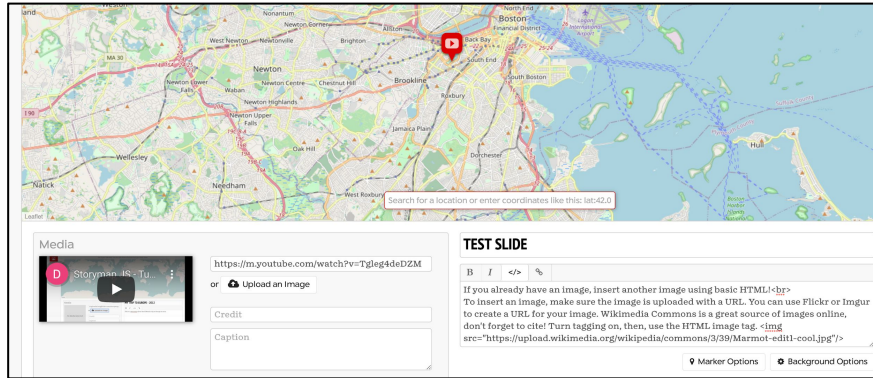
If you have an image or a video in the "media" section, but want to include an image **in the text**, you can! The text box reads basic HTML.

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.
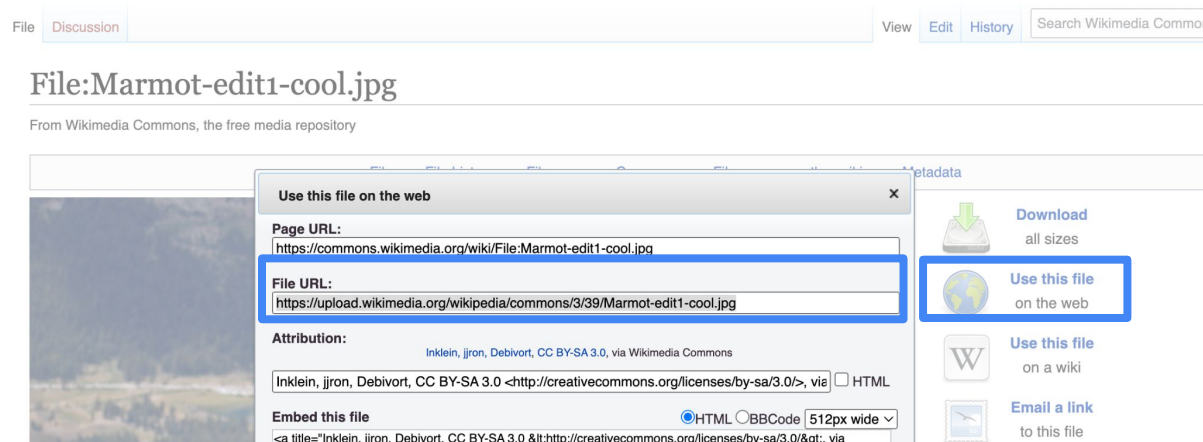

For example, to add an image from Wikimedia Commons, follow these steps:
1. Go to "More Details" and choose "Use this file on the web," or just choose "Use this file on the web" if you see that option.
2. Copy the "File URL."

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.

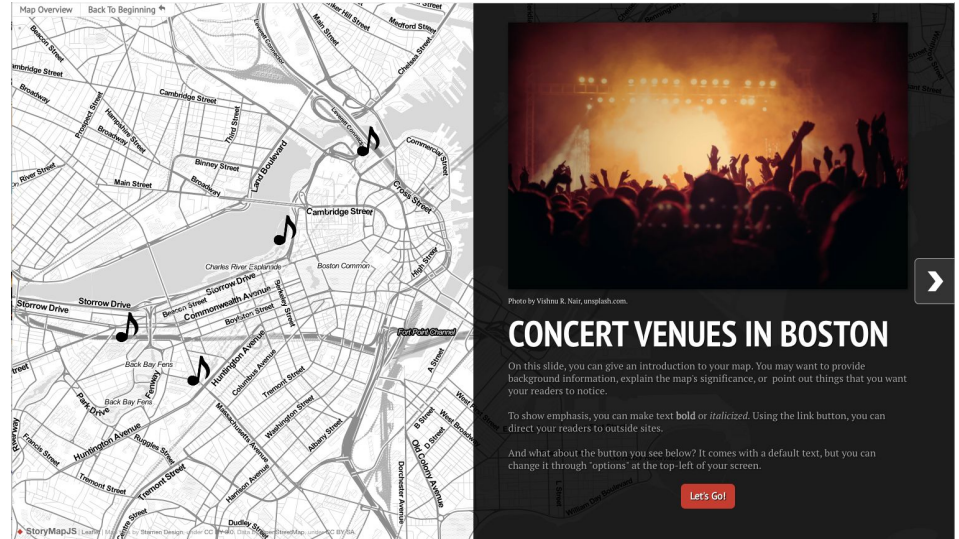*ask questions at any point during the presentation!*
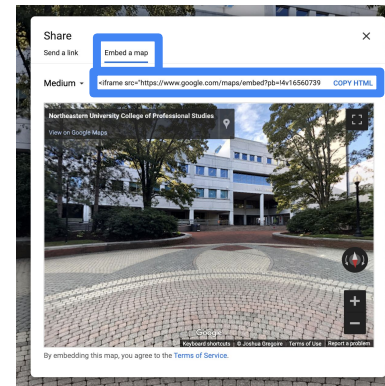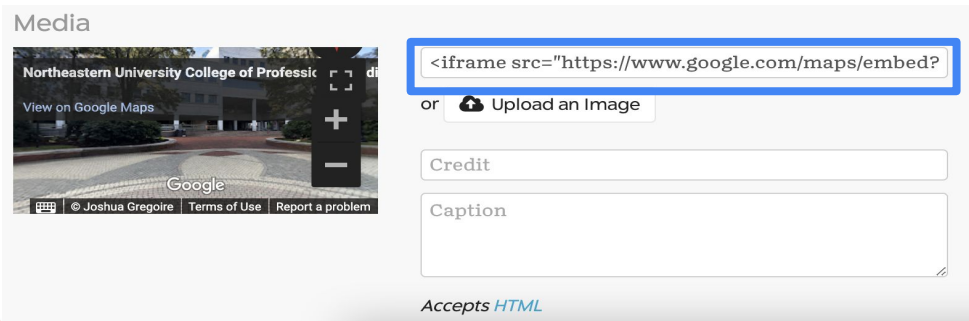
Publish and Share Your StoryMap

- 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.

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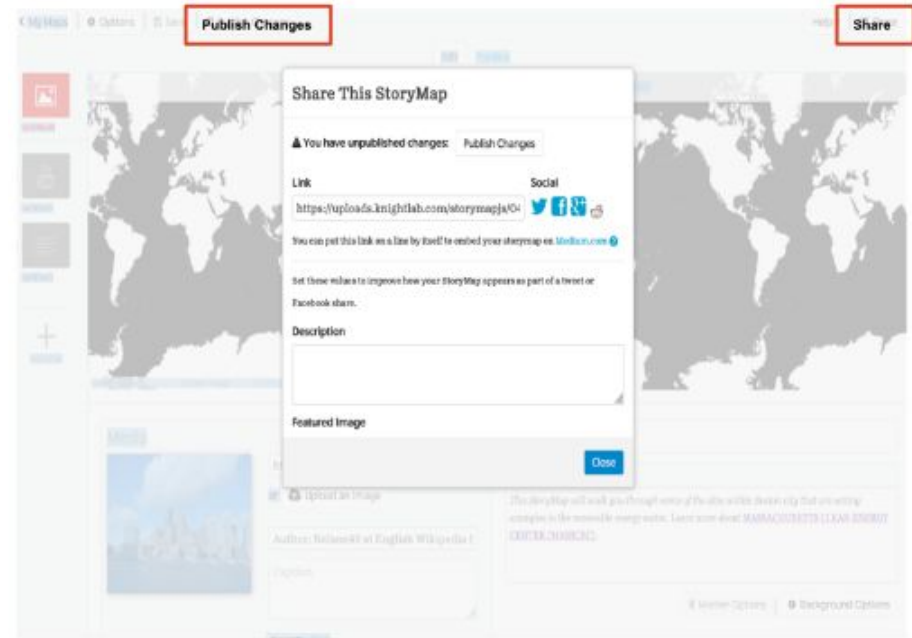
StoryMap Demo

- 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.

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

Best Practices and Advanced Options for StoryMap

A Note on Save States (1/2)

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.

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A Note on Save States (2/2)

Since you cannot retrieve older versions of the project, and you can write over work in separate windows, this can create a different problem when working on a **group project**.

It is important to assign individual users to certain sections of the StoryMap spreadsheet so as to prevent any overlap in data entry when doing a project with multiple users.

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

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.

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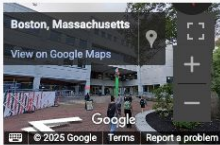
Accessibility in StoryMap (2/3)

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.

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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**."

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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

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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**.

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

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
<img src="URL"/>

#Add Alternate Text to Image/Media
<img src="IMAGE URL" alt="IMAGE
DESCRIPTION"/>
```

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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.
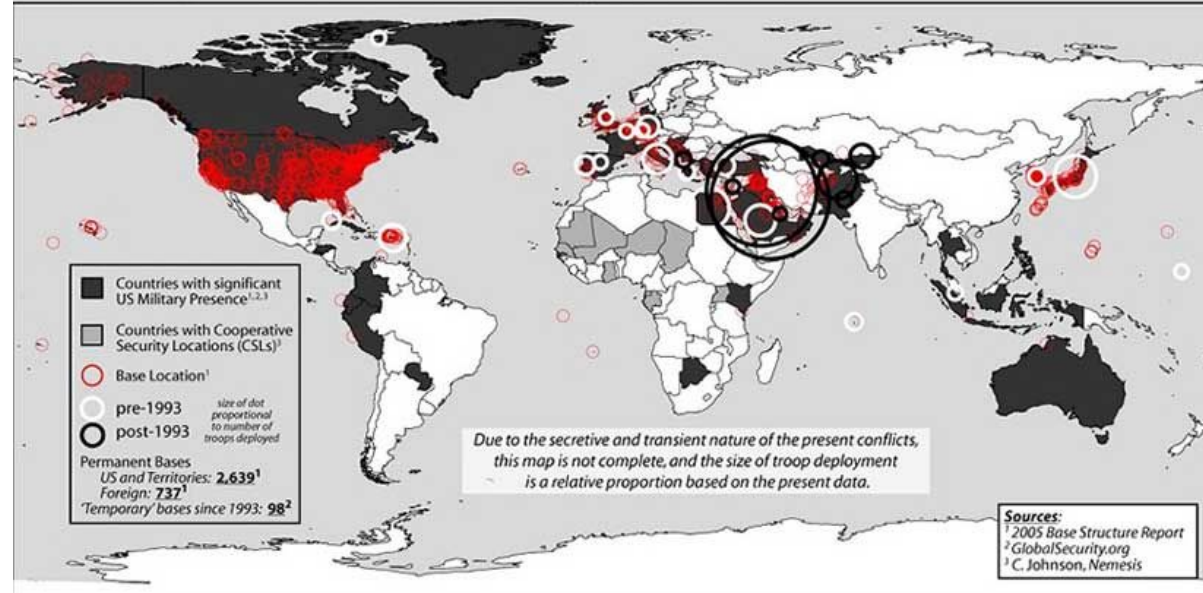

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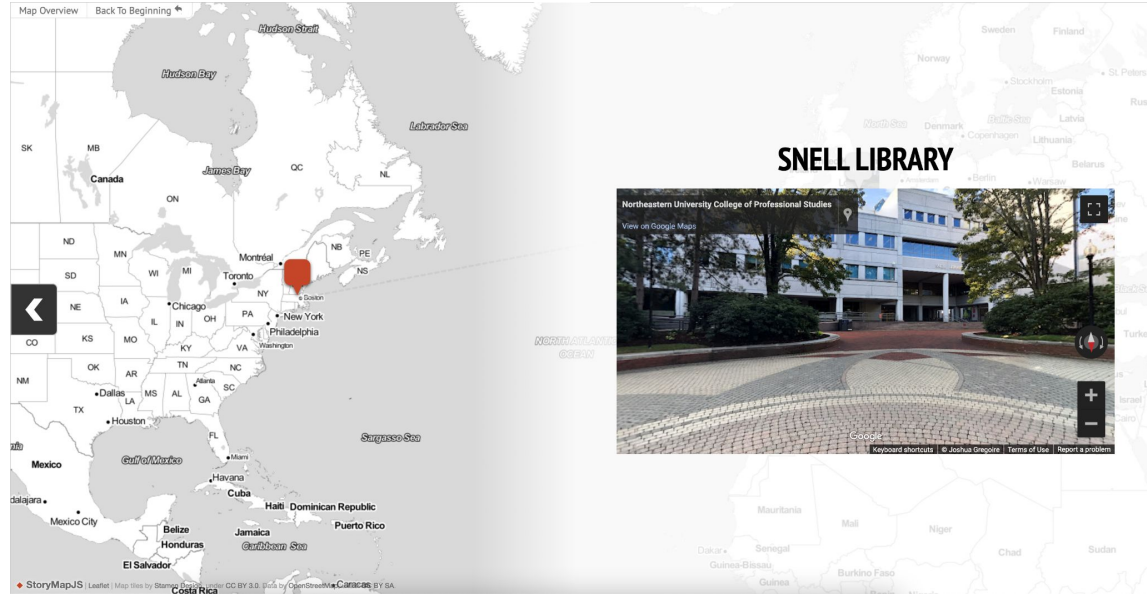
Discussion

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?

From "Critiquing Maps II", by Shannon Mattern

Source: Modern Diplomacy, 2022

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Mapping, Power, + History

"Maps are ideological blueprints—they frame the language of politics in a melding of signs and symbols that both reflect and create colorful and charged worldviews… maps communicate volumes not just in what they include but also in what geographer J. B. Harley called the "silences," or what maps choose to omit and obscure from view." — Timothy Barney, "Mapping the Cold War: Cartography and the Framing of America's International Power."

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Three Types of Activist Mapping

- Mapping as protest
  - [Examples](): *An Atlas of Radical Cartography;* [*Torn Apart/Separados*]()
- Mapping as social commentary
  - [Example](): Historic trails, such as the *Black Jazz Heritage Trail of Boston*
- Mapping as community education + local organizing
  - [Example:]() *Black Food Justice's* Map + Directory of farms, collectives, and Black mutual aid societies

Your Turn!

Try out the below:

- Identify a site for your project
- Create a StoryMap
- Edit the layout
- Add a slide
- Add the site location
- Add media and images
- Publish and save

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

For Further Exploration

Handout: StoryMap

Handout: StoryMap Data Gathering Spreadsheet

Handout: Copyright and Fair Use

Handout: StoryMap and Accessibility

Handout: HTML Basics

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

Thank you!

—Developed by Claire Lavarreda, Ana Abraham, Chris McNulty, Benjamin Grey, Halima Haruna, Sara Morrell, and Ayah Aboelela

- Slides and handouts available at:

  https://bit.ly/sp26-hist2011-storymap

- 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

- We'd love your feedback! Please fill out a short survey here:
  https://bit.ly/diti-feedback

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