

# Harvesting Helpfulness

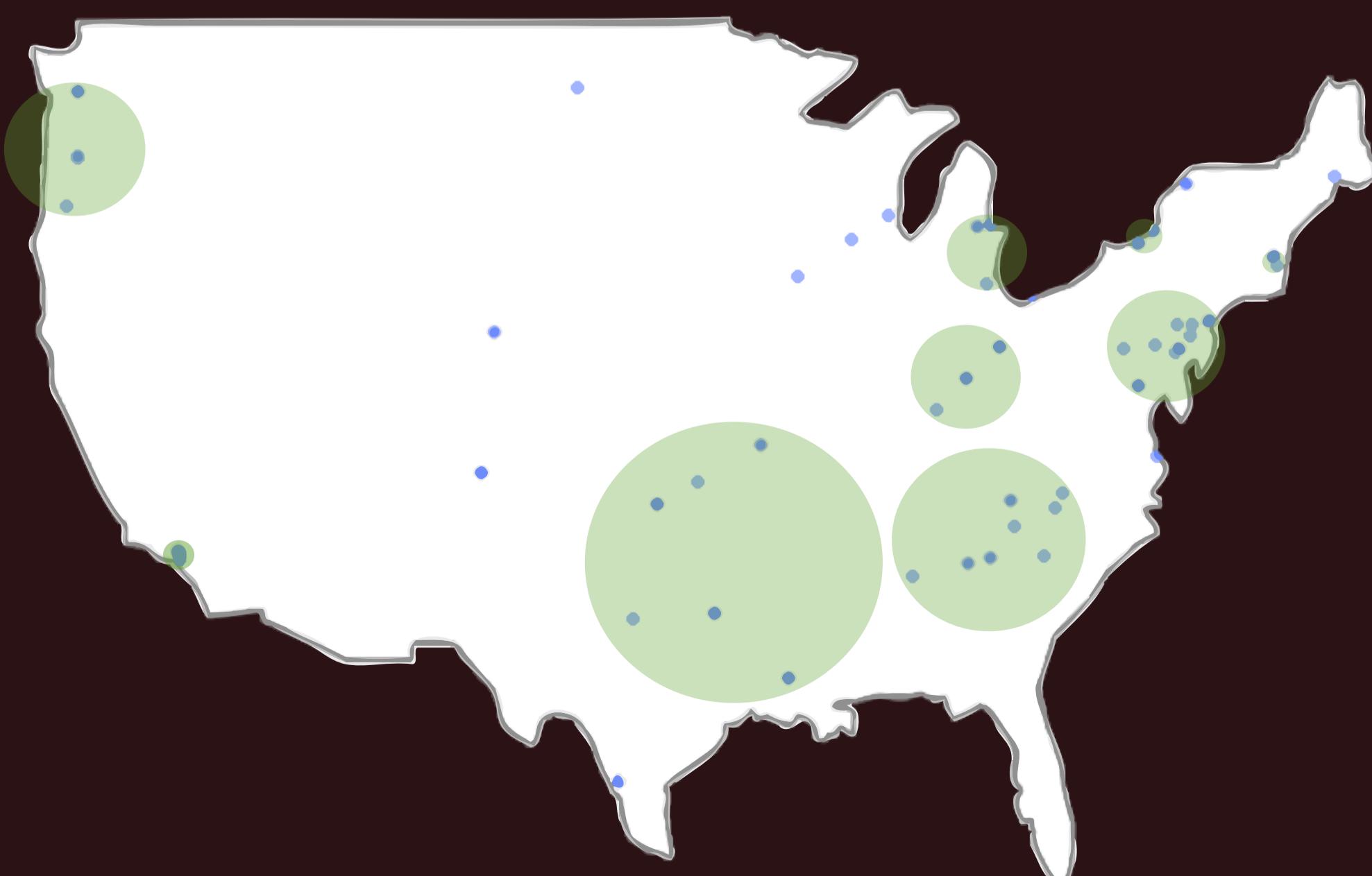
## THE FORUM

The screenshot shows a forum index page for 'From Across the Fence'. The header includes the Rodale Institute logo and navigation links for Home, New Farm, Global Warming, Nutrition, Famine Prevention, and About Us. A note at the top says 'You will be required to register before posting in any forum.' Below is a table of topics with columns for Topics, Replies, Author, Views, and Last Post. Topics include 'Tine Weeders Troubles', 'Potato Leaf Hopper', 'spider mites on spinach', 'when is orchard grass seed viable?', 'Grafted tomatoes', 'biochar ancient fertilizer', 'Oats & Buckwheat at hauling process', 'teff grass for hay', 'My crazy new experiment...', 'Use the newfarm forums from your cell phone!', 'Jang AP1 Clean Seeder - Single Row Seeder', 'Toolbar, work and uses...', 'Roll-On Roll-Off Trucks and Beds', 'cultivating tools', 'Organic Gem Liquid Fish Fertilizer', 'Mushrooms', 'Transplanting, Soil Blocks, Trays, Peat, Oh My!', 'bale wagon', and 'Tanning hides'.

Existing work in online communities has focused on studying why lurkers lurk, rather than finding ways to support lurking behavior. We wanted to see what could be done to *help lurkers lurk*.

To that end, we partnered with the Rodale Institute, operators of one of the top online farming forums, newfarm.org (pictured above). The forum has been live since 2004 and currently has about 1,300 members.

## ANALYSIS



### CLUSTERING

We wanted to know whether the maps were producing more geographically clustered traffic. To find out, we analyzed the most active threads. Using the concept of a "distortion value" (the distance from each point to the center of the nearest cluster), we looked at each thread and calculated an average value per group. The circles on the map to the left represent each major cluster identified for Group B in the thread "Cultivating Tools". The size of the circles corresponds to the distortion value for each cluster.



### "PEACH TREE PROBLEM"

This thread's Group A map is shown on the top, Group B on the bottom. The map displaying both viewers and posters of the thread reflects a much more tightly clustered viewership.

## DESIGN A DESIGN B

Two screenshots of the forum interface. The left screenshot, 'DESIGN A', shows a list of threads with small maps to the left of each post. The right screenshot, 'DESIGN B', shows the same list of threads with larger, more prominent maps to the left of each post. Both designs include a map of the United States with dots representing viewer locations.

Group A was shown maps with a dot for each viewer of a thread. Dots were stacked; visits from the same location made dots darker.

Group B saw the same maps, with the addition of orange dots for the location of each user who posted to a thread.

Our goal was to guide users' browsing of the forum without forcing them to volunteer information explicitly. Consequently, we decided to use geo-location of viewers to help users find the most relevant content. We plotted viewer locations onto maps and placed those maps next to each thread.

We devised an experiment in which we placed each visitor to newfarm.org into one of three treatment groups. Group A saw maps displaying viewer locations for each thread (above, left). Group B saw maps that showed both viewer and poster locations (above, right). A control group was not shown any maps at all.

## A Case Study of an Online Farmer's Forum

Does geographic information make forum posts more useful for non-participant viewers?

## RESULTS

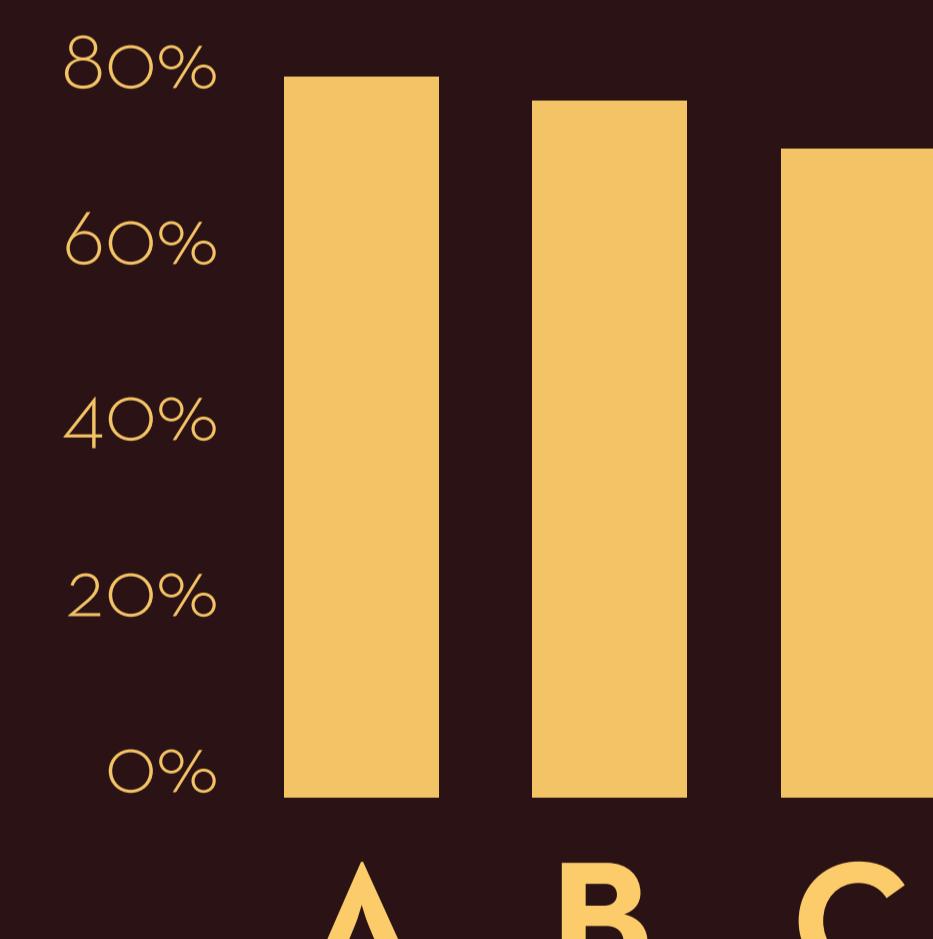
### CLUSTERING



For the most active threads, Group B users tended to be far more strongly clustered than those in Groups A or C. In fact, Group B clusters were, on average, half the size of A or B clusters.

This implies that users' viewing behavior was impacted only by knowledge of the location of posters.

### SATISFACTION



## CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the data indicated that viewing behavior was only affected when the maps showed the location of both viewers and posters. However, from interviews and further analysis, we learned that geographic location may not have been the best fit due to the forum's content and traffic characteristics. Future work will explore the design of new navigational elements to more directly address these needs.



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