Harvesting **Helpfulness**

A Case Study of an Online Farmer's Forum
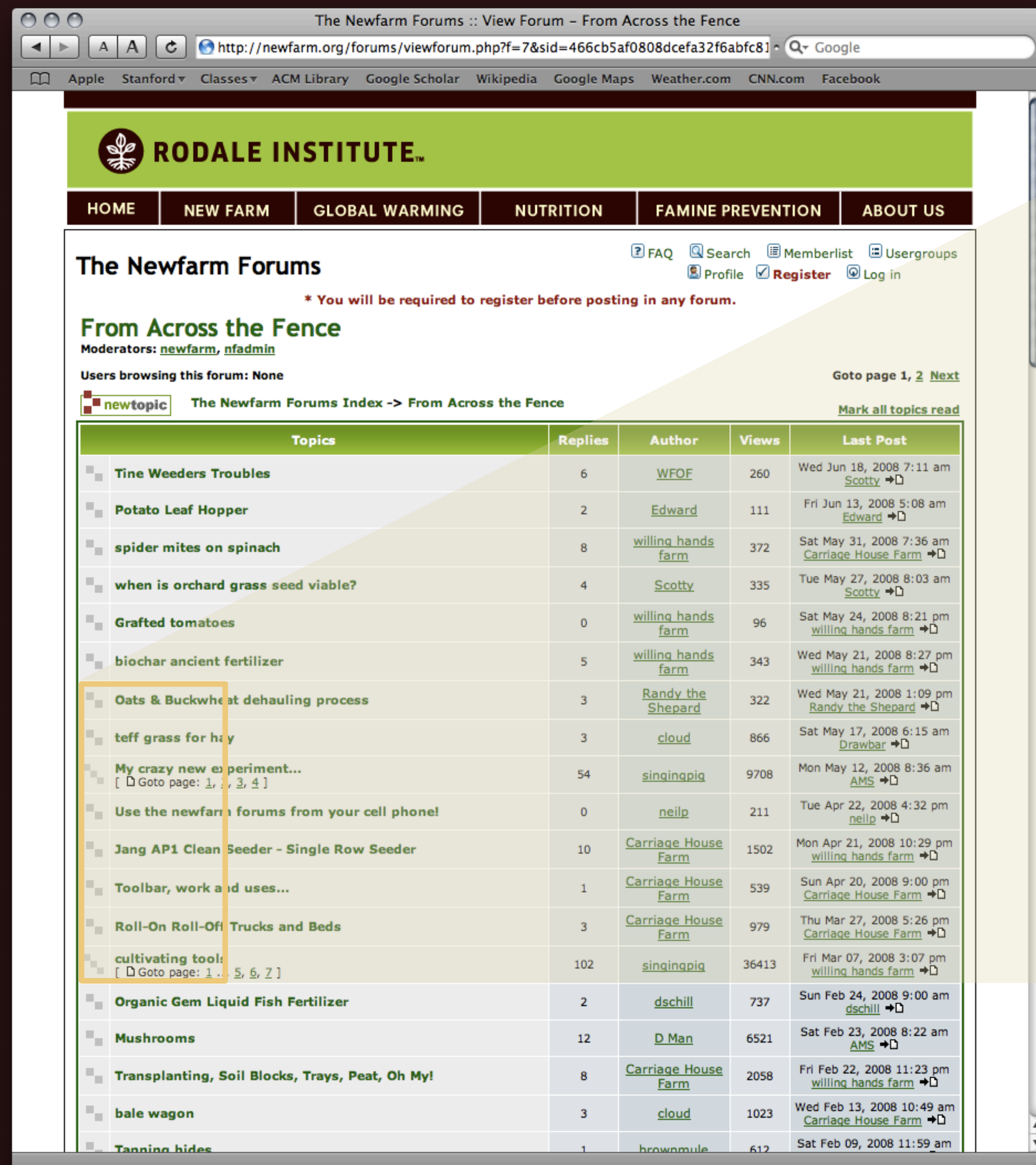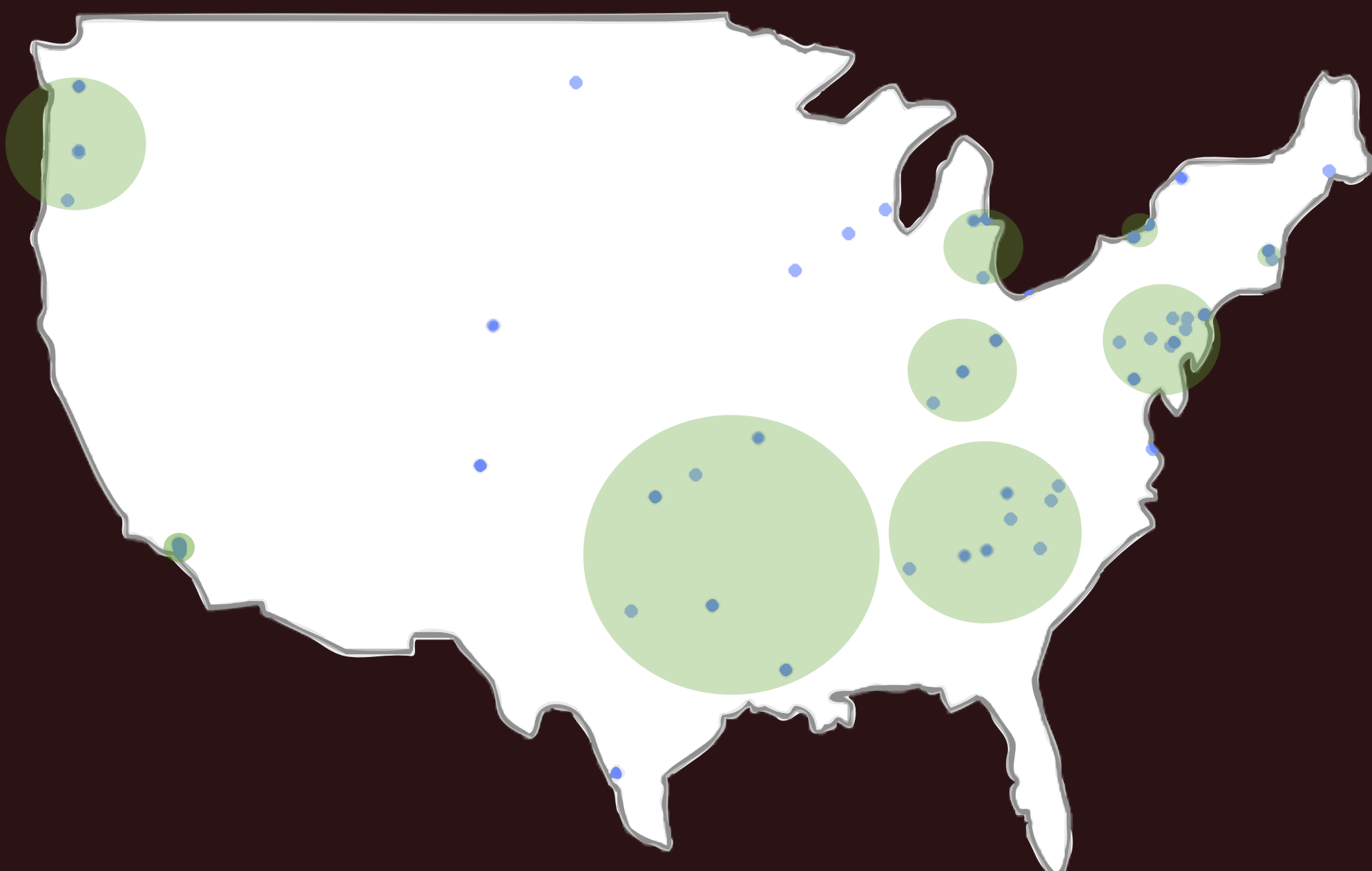
THE FORUM

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.
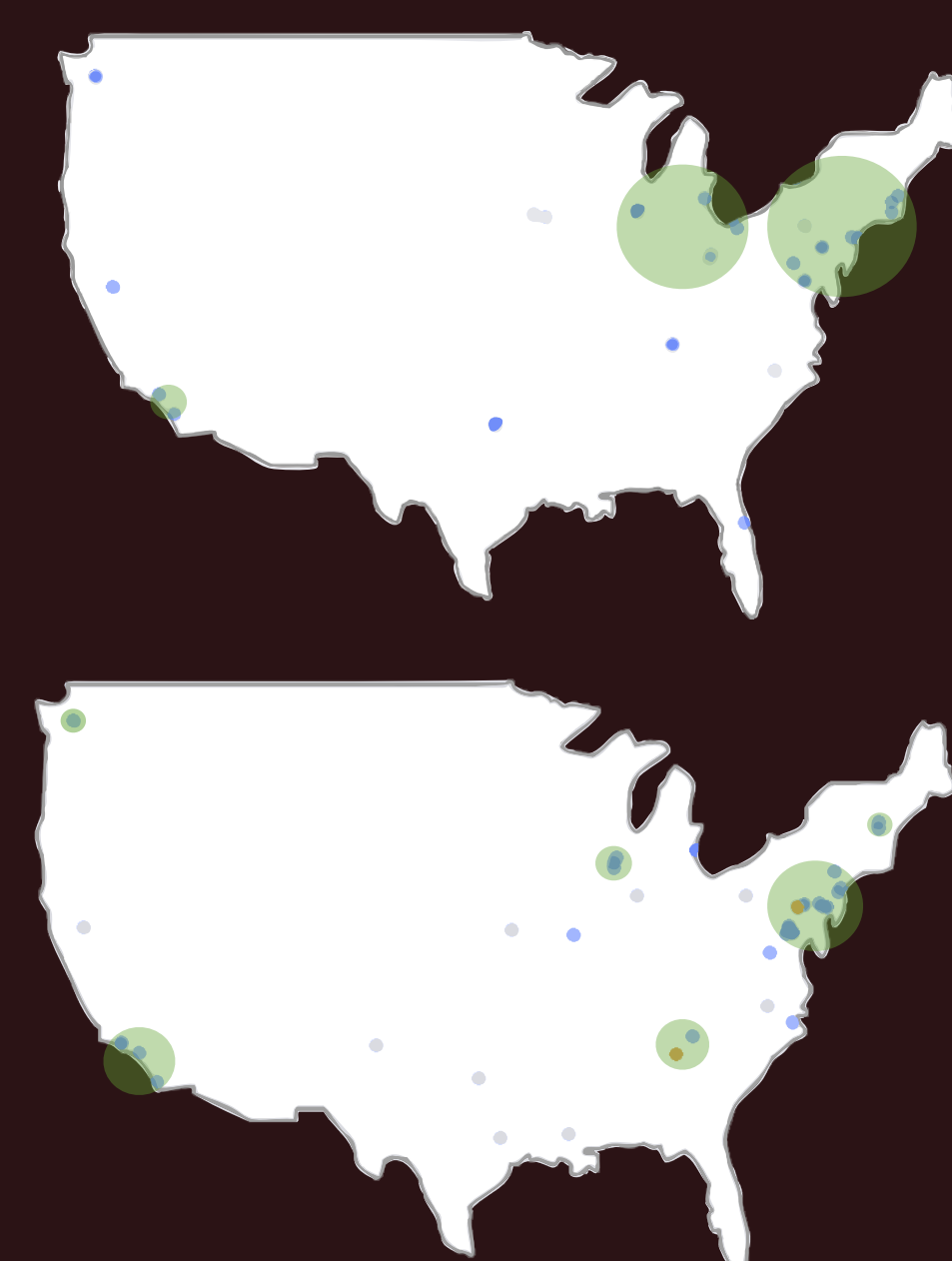
DESIGN **A**   DESIGN **B**

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.

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.
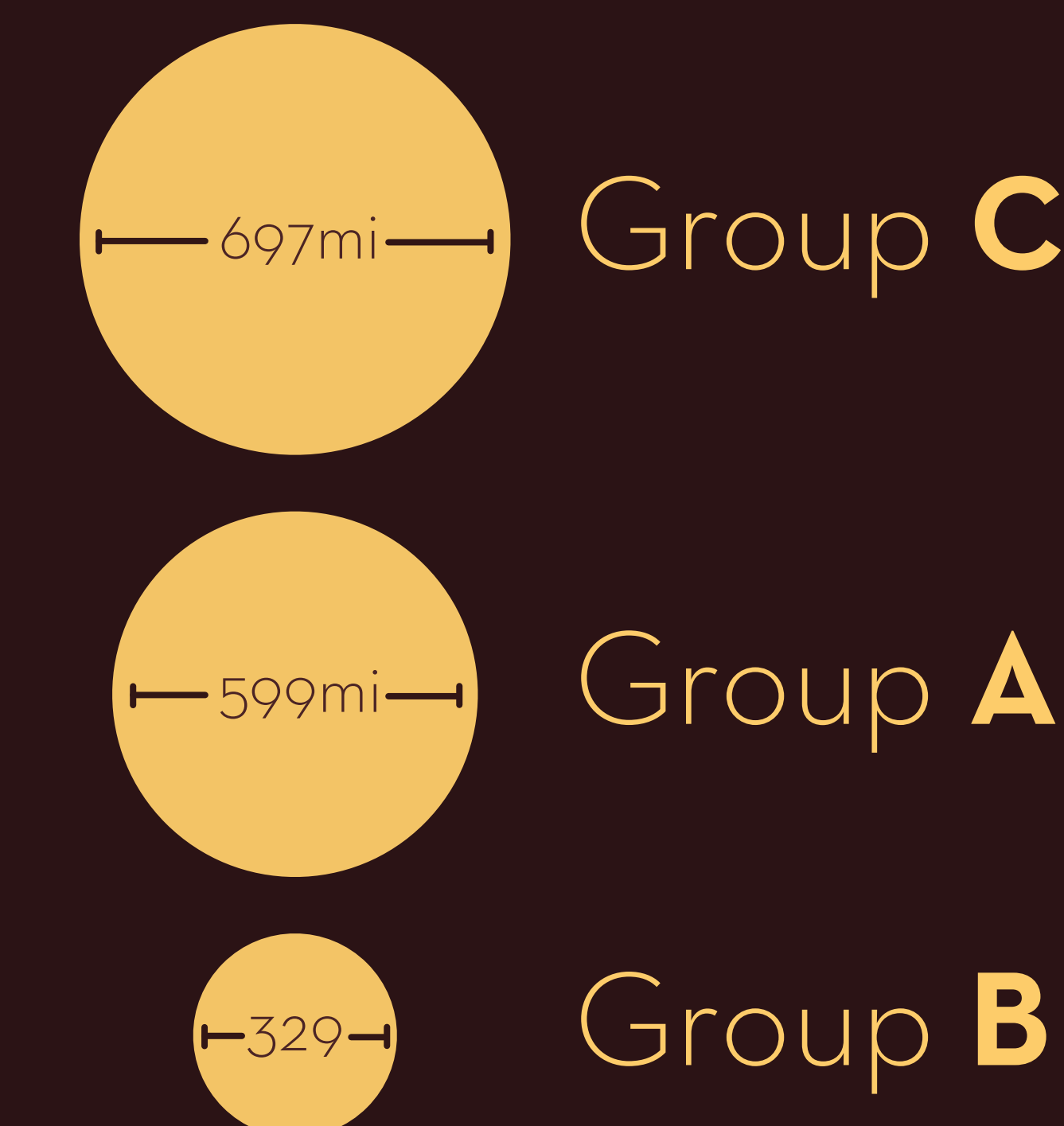
"PEACH TREE PROBLEM"

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.

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

RESULTS

Group C — 697mi
Group A — 599mi
Group B — 329

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

We added a popup to collect satisfaction votes from viewers as they browsed the forum. Using it, we collected over 1000 votes. Positive votes accounted for 82% and 78% of all votes from Groups A and B respectively, but were only 70% of Group C's votes, a statistically significant drop-off.
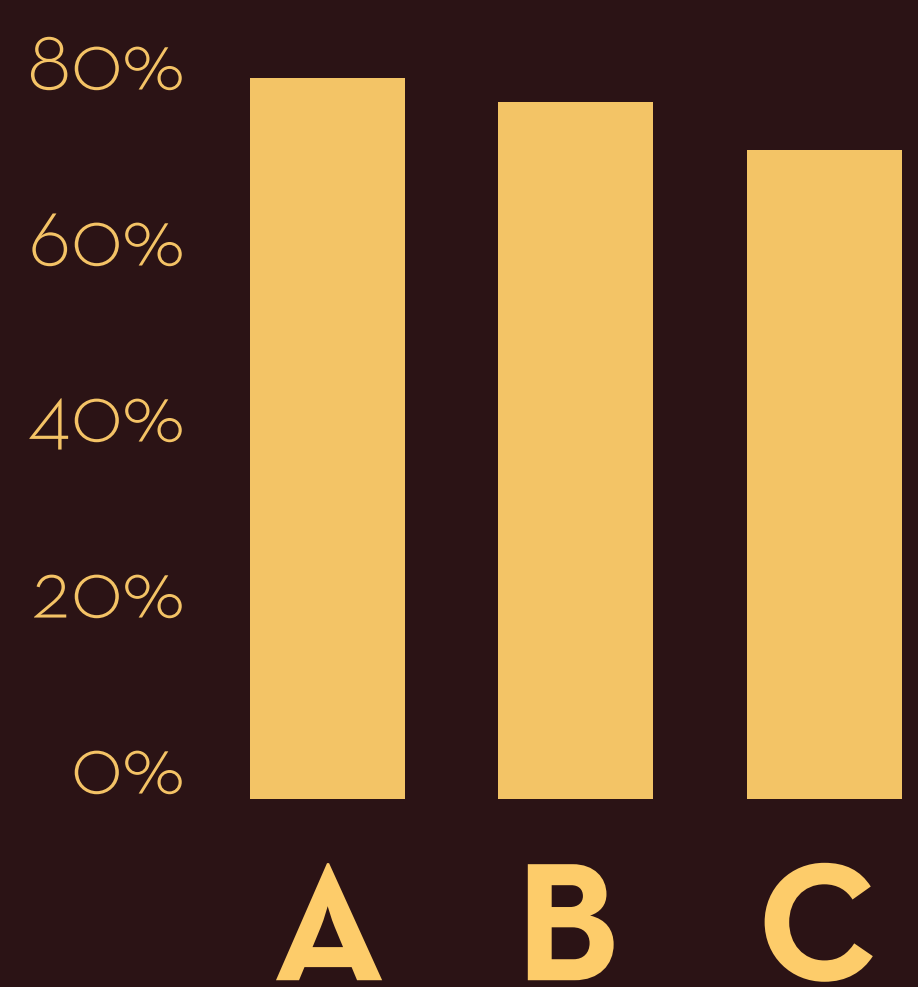
CONCLUSIONS

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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