**Be Less Stupid: Digital Content Is Destroying Your Comprehension**

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**NEED PROOF AMERICANS ARE READING FEWER BOOKS?** You remember books, right? Elegant stacks of actual paper pages, neatly bound in numerical order? Well, we're reading fewer and fewer of them. As evidence, just last week, members of the Westboro Baptist Church held an iPhone burning.

Here's the good news, though. While the reading of paper books declines, the reading of e-books is skyrocketing. Except for when people are playing Candy Crush.

SHOULD WE WORRY? There's one group in particular where this rise in digital reading should be cause for concern. I'm talking about doctors during surgeries. I kid. I'm talking about college campuses. The 2103 Pearson Student Mobile Device [Survey](http://www.pearsoned.com/wp-content/uploads/Pearson-Student-Mobile-Device-Survey-2013-National-Report-on-College-Students-public-release.pdf) reports that 66% of college students are now reading their course work on a digital device rather than from a traditional textbook. OK, that might not sound terrible, but it has nearly put the book bag industry out of business.

You see, the problem is that we don't know what effect, if any, reading content on a digital device has on retention and comprehension. Until now.

THE EXPERIMENT. In Sept. 2013, at DragonCon (a ginormous pop-culture fan convention), This vs That gathered together a group of 60 adults. This group was divided in half. The first group, our control, was given the first page of the New York Times best selling novel, The Silent Wife on one side of an 8/12" X 11 piece of paper. The font and spacing were identical to what you'd find in a traditional novel

Group two also read the first page of The Silent Wife, however, they read the material off of their smartphones.

Each group was given 5 minutes to read. They were NOT told if anything would happen next. After 5 minutes, everyone was given a 9 question test to determine how much of the content on page 1 of The Silent Wife they absorbed. I'm going to tell you the results in just a moment. But first...

**Is Comprehension Affected By The Content's Delivery Device?**

PARTICIPATE: Here's an opportunity for you to take a simple reading comprehension test -- and compare your comprehension to similar material on a digital device. Don't worry. There are no grades and since you don't submit anything, no one will know how you did.

THE CLOZE TEST: One of the more popular tools educators and scientists utilize to test a reader's comprehension is the Cloze Test. Below, a paragraph has been copied from the Facebook privacy settings page. Your job is to fill in -- in your mind -- as many of the missing words as is possible - using sentence structure and context as your clues. Don't worry about how long it takes you.

Site activity information. We keep 1.\_\_\_\_\_\_ of some of the actions 2.\_\_\_\_\_\_ take on Facebook, such as 3.\_\_\_\_\_\_ connections (including joining a group 4.\_\_\_\_\_\_ adding a friend), creating a 5.\_\_\_\_\_\_ album, sending a gift, poking 6.\_\_\_\_\_\_ user, indicating you "like" a 7.\_\_\_\_\_\_, attending an event, or connecting 8.\_\_\_\_\_\_ an application. In some cases 9.\_\_\_\_\_\_ are also taking an action 10.\_\_\_\_\_\_ you provide information or content 11.\_\_\_\_\_\_ us. For example, if you 12.\_\_\_\_\_\_ a video, in addition to 13.\_\_\_\_\_\_ the actual content you uploaded, 14.\_\_\_\_\_\_ might log the fact that 15.\_\_\_\_\_\_ shared it. ©Nielsen Norman Group, 2011

Click [*here*](http://imgur.com/0esZ9rJ) if you'd like to see the answers.

OK. In the first example, you got to read the text in a standard font and size and you could see the entire paragraph simultaneously. Now, lets try this again. Only, this time, you'll read the content on your smartphone and the text will come from Google's privacy policy.

Copy this link: http://imgur.com/NXzIX70  
Click [HERE](mailto:(enter%20your%20address%20here)) to open an email. Paste the link in. Mail it to yourself.  
Open this email on your phone!  
Click the link.  
Read the text. In your mind, fill in the missing words.  
Come back to this page to keep reading.

Click [*here*](http://imgur.com/PDyBFC3) if you'd like to see the answers.

**AN EXPLANATION**

Was the second part harder? Of course it was. Here's why. In the first example, you are able to see the entire paragraph easily. You can easily read ahead and go back to gain more context. Plus, there's no need to scroll around. You don't lose your place easily, unlike the second example, where you have to shrink or stretch the text to make it fit the smartphone screen. It's also easier in the first example to make inferences based on context... because you can easily see the entire paragraph, unlike the second example, where some content remains hidden.

Plus, and this is just intuition -- more study needs to be done -- we have all trained our brains to treat the vast preponderance of content read on a smartphone or tablet as the kind that need not be stored in the brain for easy or long term recall, like sport scores, twitter updates, facebook posts, etc...

**THE RESULTS**

So, what were the results of our experiment at DragonCon 2013, where we had half the group read the first page of the NYT bestseller, The Silent Wife on paper and the other half on their smartphone?

Among the control group, who read on actual paper, the average number of incorrect answers on the 9 question quiz was... **2.39 incorrect answers.**

Among those who read the material on their smartphones, the average number of incorrect answers on the 9 question quiz was... **3.53 incorrect answers**.

***Meaning, people who read the material on paper got slightly more than 1 additional correct answer (out of 9 questions) compared to those who read the material on their phones.***

**YOU CAN BE LESS STUPID**

COMPREHENSION WILL SUFFER. Now that you are aware that your comprehension will suffer -- to one degree or another -- by reading material on your smartphone, you can be proactive and even better, be less stupid!

* Material you'll need to really know, like school work, office work, fantasy football statistics, etc, stick to reading these things on actual paper.
* And if you read material on your phone that you're really going to need to know, slow down, pay extra attention & stop driving. Even better? Read the material twice.

If you enjoyed this research & post, please sign up [HERE](http://facebook.us3.list-manage2.com/subscribe?u=63b371abf0291ff78e9e793ab&id=0c9a5c38d5) to receive Be Less Stupid twice a week in your email.

If you'd like to read page 1 of The Silent Wife then take the comprehension quiz, you'll find the links [here](http://blog.thisvsthatshow.com/?p=3994).

*Jon Hotchkiss is the creator of a new 6-hour series that investigates the science within arm's reach.* [*This vs That*](http://thisvsthatshow.com/) *will help you make better decisions.*

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