

Summarization, AI Overviews, Compression Authority, and Reality Drift

How summaries replace source material, compressed interpretations become the default interface to knowledge, omitted context loses corrective power, and systems begin treating representations as more authoritative than what they represent

Representational Failure Series - Note #7

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Summarization reduces complex material into a form that is easier to read, compare, retrieve, and act upon. A report condenses an investigation. An executive brief condenses a report. A search result condenses a webpage. An AI overview condenses many sources into a single answer.

Compression Authority begins when the summary does more than help a person understand the source. It becomes the version of the source that downstream readers, systems, and decisions actually encounter.

The summary may remain accurate in a narrow sense. Its sentences may be defensible. Its central claims may be correctly extracted. Yet the compression process still determines what is visible, what disappears, which distinctions survive, and how the underlying material is interpreted.

Summarization becomes Compression Authority when the compressed representation gains more operational influence than the source from which it was produced.

1. The Inference Gap

Summarization is usually treated as a neutral information service.

A long document contains more material than a reader needs. A summary identifies the central points, removes repetition, and makes the content easier to use. The reader saves time while retaining the essential meaning.

This view assumes the summary remains subordinate to the source.

The reader can inspect the original material. Important claims can be verified. Ambiguities can be resolved by returning to the full context. The summary functions as an entry point rather than a replacement.

That relationship is changing.

Search engines increasingly present direct answers before source pages. AI systems synthesize multiple documents into a single response. Workplace tools condense meetings, emails, reports, and conversations. Decision-makers receive briefs produced from other briefs. People act on compressed material without encountering the underlying evidence.

The summary becomes the primary interface.

Once this occurs, omission is no longer a minor byproduct of convenience. What the compression layer excludes may never enter the reader's model of the subject. What it emphasizes may become the apparent center of the source. Uncertainty, disagreement, provenance, exceptions, and boundary conditions can disappear without any individual sentence becoming obviously false.

The central failure is therefore not necessarily inaccurate summarization.

It is the transfer of authority from the source to the compression layer.

That is the transition from summarization to Compression Authority.

2. The Mechanism

The relationship unfolds through a sequence of complexity reduction, interface substitution, source abandonment, and downstream dependence.

Stage 1: Source Complexity

The original material contains more structure than a reader can quickly absorb.

A research paper may include methods, qualifications, conflicting evidence, limitations, definitions, and unresolved questions. A legal record may include testimony, procedural context, disputed interpretations, and exceptions. A meeting may contain uncertainty, hesitation, disagreement, and ideas that were later revised.

The source is difficult because the reality it represents is difficult.

Its length is not always accidental. Some of the complexity preserves distinctions that are necessary for correct interpretation.

Stage 2: Compression

A summarization layer reduces the material.

It selects central claims, removes examples, groups related ideas, and rewrites the content into a shorter form. The result becomes more legible and easier to circulate.

Every summary must make decisions.

It decides what counts as central, which context can be removed, how strongly a conclusion should be stated, and which sequence best explains the material.

These choices may be responsible and useful. They are still interpretive.

The summary is not simply less of the source. It is a representation of what the summarizer believes matters most in the source.

Stage 3: Interface Substitution

The compressed version becomes easier to access than the original.

The summary appears at the top of a search page. It enters an executive dashboard. It is delivered in an email digest. It becomes the default answer produced by an assistant. The source is available only through another click, longer reading, restricted access, or a separate system.

Convenience changes the relationship between the two layers.

Readers encounter the representation first and often stop there.

The summary no longer supplements the source. It intercepts access to it.

Stage 4: Source Abandonment

The underlying material receives less direct attention.

Readers assume the summary has captured what matters. Time pressure makes verification unlikely. The source may be too long, technical, fragmented, or inaccessible to inspect.

The original material remains nominally available while becoming operationally irrelevant.

This matters because correction still depends on someone returning to the source.

A missing qualification can only re-enter the conversation if a reader notices that it is absent. A misleading emphasis can only be challenged if someone encounters the broader structure from which the summary was produced.

When source consultation declines, the compression layer loses an important external constraint.

Stage 5: Omission Becomes Invisible

Information removed during summarization no longer appears as missing.

The reader sees only the compressed output. There is no direct indication of how much context disappeared, which disagreements were simplified, or which examples did not fit the final framing.

The absence is therefore difficult to inspect.

A summary may preserve the conclusion while removing the conditions under which the conclusion holds. It may preserve the recommendation while removing the tradeoffs. It may preserve the consensus while removing the minority position that explains where the consensus is weakest.

The compression remains coherent because the omitted material is no longer present to create friction.

Stage 6: Interpretive Hardening

The summary's framing becomes the accepted meaning of the source.

A tentative finding becomes a stable claim. A contested interpretation becomes the main takeaway. A complex institutional event becomes a clean narrative. A range of possibilities becomes a single answer.

This does not require deliberate distortion.

Compression rewards clarity. Systems that produce summaries are often optimized for relevance, fluency, brevity, and decisiveness. Ambiguity is difficult to preserve because it makes the output appear less useful.

The representation therefore becomes more definite as the underlying material becomes less visible.

Stage 7: Downstream Dependence

Other people and systems begin acting on the compressed version.

A manager allocates resources based on an executive brief. A model answers a question using summaries rather than primary sources. A journalist cites an overview. A student relies on an AI explanation. Another system summarizes the first summary.

The compressed representation becomes an input to later decisions and later representations.

At this point, its authority is no longer merely interpretive.

It is operational.

Stage 8: Compression Authority

The summary acquires more influence than the source.

It determines which claims circulate, which distinctions remain available, and which interpretations become actionable. The source may still exist, but it no longer governs how the information is understood.

The compressed layer becomes the effective reality of the material.

This is Compression Authority.

3. Compression Authority Does Not Require Falsehood

The concept should not be reduced to inaccurate summarization.

A summary can be factually correct and still exercise excessive authority.

The problem may appear through selection rather than fabrication. Every included statement may be supported, while the overall representation remains misleading because the omitted material would have changed the reader's interpretation.

A medical summary may accurately list symptoms while omitting the timeline that alters their significance. A policy overview may accurately state the objective while omitting implementation failures. An AI answer may accurately combine several sources while flattening their disagreement.

The individual claims survive.

The structure of the source does not.

Compression Authority concerns who controls the usable meaning of the material after compression, not merely whether the resulting sentences contain errors.

4. The Summary Becomes the Source

A significant transition occurs when later readers no longer know that they are encountering a compression.

An AI-generated answer may be copied into an article. The article may be indexed by search. Another model may retrieve the article and summarize it again. An executive brief may be cited in later reports without reference to the underlying analysis.

The representation begins circulating independently.

Its wording becomes detachable from the evidence that originally supported it.

This creates source inversion.

The original document is treated as background material, while the summary becomes the version that future systems can most easily retrieve, quote, and reuse.

Over time, the compressed representation may become easier to find than the source and more influential in determining what the source is believed to say.

5. Compression Authority and AI Overviews

AI overviews make this mechanism especially visible.

Traditional search presents sources that the user must inspect. An overview synthesizes those sources before the user encounters them. The system selects evidence, resolves apparent disagreement, and produces a single readable answer.

This can improve access.

It also moves interpretation upstream.

The user no longer chooses which sources deserve attention before forming a view. The summarization system makes that decision first. It determines which pages enter the synthesis, which claims appear central, and how uncertainty is expressed.

The overview therefore does not merely retrieve knowledge.

It mediates the boundary between the user and the source environment.

When most users accept the overview without opening the underlying material, the summarization layer becomes the practical authority over what the sources mean.

6. Compression Authority and Provenance

Compression weakens meaning most severely when provenance becomes difficult to inspect.

A useful summary should preserve enough information for the reader to distinguish observation, interpretation, inference, and uncertainty. It should allow important claims to be traced back to their sources.

When provenance is absent, the compressed output appears self-supporting.

The reader sees a fluent answer but cannot easily determine which claim came from which source, whether several sources were truly independent, or whether the summary merged conflicting positions into a synthetic consensus.

The answer becomes more usable as evidence while becoming harder to audit as evidence.

This creates a dangerous asymmetry.

Operational confidence increases while epistemic traceability declines.

7. Summaries of Summaries

Compression Authority becomes stronger when compressed representations are recursively reused.

A long report becomes an executive summary. The executive summary becomes a slide. The slide becomes a meeting note. The note becomes an AI-generated action list. The action list becomes a dashboard update.

Each layer preserves part of the previous representation while removing additional context.

The later artifact may remain connected to the original source in principle, but the practical path back becomes longer and less likely to be followed.

This creates Recursive Compression in knowledge systems.

The loss at each stage may be small. Across several stages, the remaining representation can become clean, decisive, and detached from the structure that once made it trustworthy.

The system does not merely forget details.

It forgets which details were necessary.

8. Why Organizations Prefer Compressed Authority

Large organizations cannot operate by having every participant inspect every source.

They require briefs, dashboards, summaries, and decision memos. Compression is necessary for coordination.

But summaries also serve institutional needs beyond understanding.

They create a stable record. They make decisions easier to defend. They remove ambiguity that might delay action. They create alignment around a shared interpretation.

These functions give compressed artifacts institutional value.

A summary may remain authoritative even after participants recognize that it is incomplete because the organization needs one version of events through which to coordinate.

The source may contain too much disagreement to support a clear decision. The summary resolves that disagreement by selecting a usable narrative.

Compression Authority persists because institutions often require decisiveness more than fidelity.

9. Compression Authority and Reality Drift

Reality Drift begins when a system continues acting through representations that no longer remain answerable to the conditions they compress.

Summaries can contribute to this process when they repeatedly replace direct source contact.

The system continues receiving information. Reports circulate. Answers appear immediately. Meetings produce action items. Search produces concise explanations.

Nothing appears absent because the compression layer continues generating usable outputs.

Yet the information reaching decisions becomes increasingly selected, flattened, and detached from its provenance.

The system remains informed at the level of representation while losing contact with the complexity of the underlying reality.

That is Reality Drift through compression.

10. Compression Is Not the Enemy

A framework built around Compression Authority should not imply that all summarization is harmful.

Compression is essential to thought, language, learning, and coordination. A useful summary can reveal structure that is difficult to see in the full material. It can reduce noise, clarify relationships, and make specialized knowledge accessible.

The issue is not whether information has been compressed.

The issue is whether the compressed layer remains subordinate and answerable to what it represents.

Healthy compression preserves routes back to the source. It identifies uncertainty. It distinguishes quotation from inference. It signals where important context was removed. It allows contradictory evidence to revise the summary.

Compression becomes authoritative in the dangerous sense when those corrective channels weaken and the representation begins validating itself.

11. Boundary Conditions

Not every summary becomes Compression Authority.

Summarization remains a useful aid when:

- readers can easily access the source
- important claims remain traceable

- uncertainty and disagreement are preserved
- the summary is treated as an interpretation rather than a replacement
- high-stakes decisions require source review
- omitted context can still correct the compressed account
- multiple independent summaries remain available
- the compression layer can be revised by evidence outside itself

Compression Authority becomes more likely when:

- the source is difficult, costly, or inconvenient to access
- the summary appears before the source
- readers rarely verify claims
- downstream systems reuse the compressed output
- provenance is weak or absent
- fluency is treated as evidence of completeness
- a single summary becomes the default institutional narrative
- the system rewards decisiveness more than fidelity
- summaries are repeatedly compressed into later summaries

The summary does not need to be completely inaccurate.

It only needs to become more influential than the source and less corrigible by it.

12. Composition

This mechanism connects several concepts across information systems and the Reality Drift framework.

Summarization describes the reduction of complex material into a shorter representation.

Compression describes the broader removal of informational detail while preserving selected structure.

Semantic Fidelity describes how well the compressed representation preserves the meaning necessary for downstream use.

Source substitution occurs when the summary becomes the main object readers encounter instead of the underlying material.

Interpretive hardening describes how tentative or contested material becomes more definite through repeated compression.

Provenance loss explains why claims become harder to trace back to independent evidence.

Recursive Compression describes the reuse of summaries as inputs for further summaries and decisions.

Compression Authority describes the resulting transfer of operational power from the source to the compressed representation.

Reality Drift describes the larger condition in which systems remain informed and functional while becoming progressively less answerable to the realities their summaries claim to represent.

The full sequence can be written as:

Complex source → summary → interface substitution → reduced source access → invisible omission → interpretive hardening → downstream dependence → Compression Authority

A broader sequence is:

Source reality → compressed representation → recursive reuse → weakened provenance → operational authority → Reality Drift

13. The Operator Test

If summarization has become Compression Authority, several patterns should appear.

Readers should act on the summary without inspecting the source. The compressed version should circulate more widely than the underlying material. Disagreement with the summary should be treated as disagreement with the source itself.

The summary should also become harder to correct over time.

Once it enters reports, search results, model outputs, or institutional decisions, later systems should retrieve the compressed framing more readily than the original evidence. Repetition should make the representation appear more established even when many repetitions descend from the same initial summary.

A useful test is:

What information could change the summary's interpretation, and is that information still likely to reach the people acting on it?

If corrective context remains trapped in the source while decisions occur at the summary layer, Compression Authority is present.

A second test is:

Could a reader tell which important distinctions were removed without returning to the original material?

If not, the summary may be functioning as an opaque compression layer rather than a transparent aid.

Evidence against the mechanism would include regular source consultation, preserved provenance, visible uncertainty, and downstream decisions that change when the underlying material contradicts the summary.

Canonical Claim

Summarization becomes Compression Authority when the compressed representation replaces the source as the primary object of knowledge and action.

The summary selects what survives.

The source loses corrective power.

The system begins treating what was easiest to preserve as though it were everything that mattered.