

Reality Drift and the Dead Internet Theory

How provenance failure makes online participation difficult to reconstruct

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The Dead Internet Theory

The Dead Internet Theory is a cultural hypothesis that much of online activity no longer reflects spontaneous, independent human participation. It points to automated accounts, generated content, recommendation systems, copied material, and engagement mechanisms that simulate the appearance of a socially active environment.

The literal claim is less important than the perception behind it. People increasingly encounter online material whose origin, authorship, independence, and transformation history cannot be reliably reconstructed.

The Reality Drift Connection

Reality Drift reframes the problem as provenance failure inside a recursively mediated environment. A post may begin with a person, a model, an institutional template, a content farm, or an earlier derivative. It can then be summarized, copied, ranked, regenerated, and returned to users without preserving the chain that produced it.

As material moves through mediation, copying, generation, amplification, and repeated reuse, its relationship to the original source becomes progressively harder to reconstruct. By the time it returns to the information environment, derivative material can appear as new or independent activity even when much of it descends from earlier representations.

This is not a clean contest between humans and bots. Much of the environment is hybrid. Human intention passes through automated systems, synthetic outputs are edited by people, and generated material becomes the basis for later human expression. The contribution at each stage may be real while the independence of the final output remains impossible to establish.

Recursive Compression and Provenance Failure

Recursive Compression occurs when already compressed representations become inputs to later transformations. Context lost in an early summary, template, or generated response cannot be restored merely because the derivative is fluent. Repetition can make the output feel established even when many apparent sources descend from the same origin.

Provenance failure removes the route back through that chain. Citations, usernames, timestamps, and platform labels may remain, yet they do not reveal how the material was selected, transformed, or inherited. Apparent agreement can therefore arise from recursive copying rather than independent observation.

Synthetic Realness and Filter Fatigue

Synthetic Realness appears when polished, convincing material starts to feel more trustworthy than the messier reality behind it. Filter Fatigue sets in when people have to keep asking whether something is human, generated, copied, coordinated, current, or actually grounded in an independent source. A platform can look more active than ever while becoming harder to make sense of, because the activity remains visible even as its human origin becomes harder to trace.

What Reality Drift Adds

Dead Internet Theory names the suspicion that online participation is no longer what it appears to be. Reality Drift explains the provenance failure, recursive mediation, and synthetic credibility that make the suspicion increasingly difficult to resolve.

The system does not need to become entirely synthetic. It only needs to lose the ability to distinguish independent human participation from recursively produced evidence of participation.

Where This Pattern Appears

This pattern appears when generated articles are summarized by other generated systems, when automated and human responses shape one another in comment sections, and when repeated claims appear independently sourced despite sharing a common derivative origin. It also appears in training and recommendation loops that reuse earlier platform outputs as new evidence, allowing material produced inside the system to return as apparent confirmation of the activity the system helped create.

Source Note

Dead Internet Theory is treated here as an online cultural hypothesis rather than an established empirical account. Related Reality Drift concepts include provenance failure, Recursive Compression, recursive mediation, Synthetic Realness, and Filter Fatigue.