

The Shape of What Gets Lost

On dimensional collapse, communication, and why understanding is harder than transmitting information.

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I. M. Sanford / Editorial essay. Public-facing conceptual edition.

A shadow is not the object

Imagine a three-dimensional object casting a shadow on a wall. The shadow is real, and it conveys something true about the object. But depth has disappeared. More than one object can cast a similar outline.

Communication has a comparable limitation. We often speak as though an idea moves intact from one person to another. In practice, a message represents only part of a richer internal experience. The recipient must make sense of what remains.

The difficulty is not simply that people choose imperfect words. Any representation emphasizes certain features and leaves others behind. The meaning we recover depends partly on which features survive.

Before language, there is already an idea. Complex thought may contain relationships, contradictions, priorities, and possibilities that are not naturally sequential. Language is sequential. Putting an idea into words therefore involves selection.

Different languages and audiences offer different ways of expressing the same underlying thought. A familiar phrase may convey considerable meaning to one person and almost none to another.

The message is more than words

Tone, timing, gesture, shared history, and social context often change what a sentence means. The same words can communicate enthusiasm, uncertainty, or reluctance depending on how they are delivered.

The medium matters too. A telephone call omits visual cues. A written message omits vocal expression. A transcript may preserve the words while losing much of the context that made them meaningful.

None of these formats is inherently defective. Each is useful for different purposes. The important question is whether the form preserves what matters for the intended understanding.

Compression is not corruption. A subway map excludes nearly everything about the city, yet it can be excellent at showing how stations connect. It succeeds because the relationships needed for its purpose remain visible.

Misunderstanding can occur when sender and recipient rely on different assumptions about what is important. A technically accurate message can still lead to an incomplete interpretation.

Understanding is reconstruction under uncertainty

When a message supports several plausible interpretations, certainty should be limited. A single view may not be enough to distinguish between them. This is an ordinary feature of communication, not necessarily evidence of carelessness.

The issue extends beyond conversations. Organizations use dashboards, presentations, records, and summaries to make complicated realities manageable. Each can clarify one aspect while obscuring another.

As more decisions rely on condensed representations, a polished summary may feel more complete than the evidence behind it warrants. Clarity of presentation should not be mistaken for completeness of understanding.

The missing dimension may contain the answer. What has been left outside the frame? What context would change the interpretation? Which relationships must remain visible for a decision to be sound?

These questions matter in communication, leadership, and information security alike. The goal is not to eliminate simplification. It is to remain conscious of its limits.

Perhaps understanding is not merely receiving a message. It is arriving at a sufficiently compatible interpretation while recognizing what remains unknown.

Editorial note: This publication presents a general perspective. It does not describe proprietary implementation, validated predictive performance, specific client findings, or granted intellectual-property rights.