The Trigger Decision: When the Overview Appears, When It Does Not — A Gate-Stack Model of AI Overview Rendering and the Settlement Signal It Emits (EA-AIO-TRIGGER-01 v1.0)

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Abstract

A v1.0 research instrument by Lee Sharks modeling the decision to render a Google AI Overview as a **global dial plus four serial gates**: utility, confidence, policy patch, and latency/cache economics. It contrasts the push surface of AI Overviews with the pull surface of AI Mode through the proposed Consent Transfer Principle.

The paper's settlement-theoretic claim is that render presence or absence is itself measurable output. It defines **Settlement Lag** as the interval between first stable AI Mode rendering of an entity's authored structure and first corresponding AI Overview rendering, then offers five falsifiable predictions and a repeated-sampling protocol. The gate architecture synthesizes patents, public statements, third-party measurements, and archive observations; several components remain model propositions rather than verified descriptions of Google's exact production implementation.

Body

The Trigger Decision

When the Overview Appears, When It Does Not: A Gate-Stack Model of AI Overview Rendering and the Settlement Signal It Emits

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0. Finding kernel

Whether an AI Overview (AIO) appears for a given query is not noise and not mystery: it is the output of a stacked decision system whose components are separately documented — in Google's own patents, in its public statements, in its emergency interventions, and in a now-substantial third-party measurement literature. This document compiles what is known, models the decision as a gate stack (a global dial plus four gates: utility, confidence, policy patch, latency/cache), names the structural difference between AI Overviews and AI Mode as a consent transfer, and advances the settlement-theoretic claim: the render decision is itself a signal. The presence or absence of an AIO for an entity's queries is a measurable settlement variable, and the interval by which AI Mode rendering precedes AIO rendering for the same entity — the settlement lag — is proposed as an observable of basin consolidation. Five falsifiable predictions and a measurement protocol close the document.

I. Two surfaces, one asymmetry: the Consent Transfer Principle

Google Search now operates two generative surfaces. The AI Overview is a push surface: the system decides, per query, whether to inject synthesis above the organic results that two billion monthly users did not ask for. AI Mode is a pull surface: the user opens a conversational tab, and the act of opening it transfers consent — and with consent, liability — from the platform to the user.

The thresholds price that liability. In the cleanest controlled comparison to date (Otterly, April 2026), the same 100 queries triggered AI Mode 100 times and an AI Overview 49 times. AI Mode is effectively always on; the AIO is selective by design. The retrieval economics differ accordingly: where both fire on the same query, AI Mode averages roughly 310 citations against the AIO's ~51, drawing on ~3,600 unique domains against ~615, via the query fan-out technique (parallel sub-queries synthesized into one response). And the pools are differently shaped: AIOs over-index official and governmental sources — institutional consensus — while AI Mode reaches commercial, social, long-tail, and Google-owned surfaces the AIO rarely touches.

Consent Transfer Principle: *for a generative search surface, the rendering threshold varies inversely with the explicitness of the user's request for synthesis.* Unrequested synthesis carries platform liability and is rationed by confidence; requested synthesis carries user liability and is rationed only by policy. Every observed AIO/AI Mode behavioral difference — trigger rate, pool width, suppression strictness, volatility tolerance — follows from this single principle.

II. The documented trigger landscape

Intent dominates everything. Across the largest keyword panels, triggering keywords are overwhelmingly informational — one 300,000-keyword study put informational intent at 99.2% of AIO-triggering terms. Per-class rates (Seer Interactive, 49,353 queries, 2026): informational ~36%, commercial ~8%, transactional ~5%; comparison-format queries ("X vs Y") ~95%; question-format ~86%; review queries ~86%; single-word queries ~27%. Query length compounds intent: seven-plus-word queries are several times likelier to trigger than short heads. The practical translation: the AIO gate reads *an articulated informational need*; bare nouns, navigation, and purchase intent read as needs better served by links, panels, and ads.

Vertical tiers. High-trigger: health symptom queries (~75–81%), legal (~78%), relationship and education (60%+), science. Low-trigger: e-commerce/product (~3–14%), beauty, fast-moving categories (sport, television) where freshness defeats summarization. Finance triggers far less than health and shows the lowest overlap between AIO citations and top-10 organic results — consistent with both a stricter YMYL dampener and a revenue-protection consideration on monetizable queries (inference; see §V).

Hard suppressions. SE Ranking's 1,200-keyword YMYL study found zero AIOs on keywords containing "election," "elections," "president," "presidential." Google has stated that for some topics — current events named explicitly — both surfaces may return a list of links rather than a generated response, and that the systems "automatically determine where an AI response will be useful," conceding it is "not always 100 percent consistent." In January 2026, following a Guardian investigation into harmful health renderings, Google removed AIOs for specific medical queries — while near-variant phrasings of the same queries continued to trigger summaries. That detail is forensically decisive: the emergency layer operates on query strings, not meanings. A semantic gate would have caught the variants. The patch layer is literal.

Global dial. Aggregate prevalence is centrally tuned and moves in steps, not drifts: Semrush's panel ran ~6.5% (Jan 2025) → ~24.6% peak (Jul 2025) → ~15.7% (Nov 2025); BrightEdge's informational-heavy panel reads ~48% of tracked queries by Feb 2026, with Google itself citing roughly half of US searches. The divergence across panels is methodological (intent mix), but the within-panel step-changes are administrative:

someone turns the dial.

Volatility. Within triggered AIOs, composition churns: cited URLs change on the order of twelve times per month per keyword; 96% of stable-trigger keywords saw domain swaps within a month; 91% of URLs fall out, fewer than half return. AI Mode is more volatile still: identical queries re-run same-day overlap on exact URLs by only ~9%, and AI Mode's URL overlap with the AIO for the same query is ~11% — two systems, two logics. Presence and composition are governed by different layers and must be measured separately.

User-state and surface variables. Documented: rollout to logged-out users (Aug 2024) with layout differences by device (mobile hides citations behind scroll; desktop exposes a right rail); availability now spans 200+ countries and 40+ languages with staggered per-market launches; an EU competition investigation opened Dec 2025; age and account-type restrictions applied in early phases. Personalization is not incidental — see §III.

III. The patent layer: the trigger is a claimed method step

The decision this document models is not reverse-engineered folklore; it is claimed, as such, in Google's patent family "Generative summaries for search results" (US11769017B1, filed March 2023, with continuations US11886828B1, US11900068B1, US12118325). Three features of the family bear directly on triggering:

1. The selection step exists by name. The specification describes a method of "selecting none, one, or multiple generative model(s) to utilize in generating response(s) to render responsive to a query." *None* is a claimed outcome. The absence of an AIO is not a failure state; it is one branch of a selection function — which is precisely what licenses treating absence as data (§V).
2. Volatility is by design. The continuations specify that differing "additional content" is processed for different submissions of the same query — by query location, query language, and attributes of the user profile — so that *different submissions of the same query yield different summaries*, deliberately, to make the summary "resonate with the user that submitted the query." Third-party measurements of churn (§II) are observations of a designed property, not of instability.
3. The summary is allowed to exceed its sources. The specification states the generated summary "can also include content that is not directly (or even indirectly) derivable from the content processed using the LLM," drawn from the model's world knowledge. The fabrication capacity that the Semantic Exhaustion case study documents at the composition layer (doi:10.5281/zenodo.20571791) is, likewise, in the claims.

Adjacent patent literature (e.g., US20240256582A1, "Search with Generative Artificial Intelligence") describes the latency economics: generating summaries in the background while serving links immediately, caching summaries for reuse, and withholding generative treatment until demand thresholds are met — a threshold number of users asking semantically similar questions. Whatever Google's exact production implementation, the design space is documented: triggering is also a cost decision, amortized over query demand, which predicts the observed long-tail/short-head asymmetries and the lazy-load behavior of overviews that render a beat after the SERP.

IV. The Gate Stack

Synthesizing §§II–III, the render decision for an AI Overview is modeled as one dial and four gates, in series:

Gate 0 — the Dial (administrative). A global prevalence parameter, tuned centrally, moving in steps. Sets the operating point of everything downstream. Observable as discontinuities in tracker panels.

Gate 1 — the Utility Classifier (intent). Would generated synthesis serve this query better than links, panels, ads, or freshness verticals? Reads articulated informational need: question/comparison formats pass at the highest rates; bare nouns, navigation, and transactions are routed to other SERP machinery. This is the gate that a bare entity-name query ("lee sharks") fails — short, quasi-navigational, knowledge-panel-eligible.

Gate 2 — the Confidence Gate (consensus). Given utility, can a high-quality summary be generated? Operationalized (inference, well-supported) as cross-source consistency over an institutionally-weighted retrieval pool: where sources conflict, where the entity space is contested, where YMYL dampeners raise the bar, the gate fails closed. This is the gate that prices *ambiguity* — and therefore the gate that a contested or polluted entity basin fails even after passing Gate 1.

Gate 3 — the Policy Patch Layer (strings). Category blocklists (elections, current events) plus emergency literal-string patches (the January 2026 health removals, with variants still firing). Fast, manual, semantically shallow. Its literalness is an architectural confession: the deep gates cannot be retuned quickly, so corrections are bolted on at the query-string surface.

Gate 4 — Latency/Cache Economics. Synthesis is rationed by cost: cached for demand-proven queries, generated opportunistically otherwise, skipped when the latency budget loses to the SERP. Predicts demand-threshold effects and render-after-load behavior.

AI Mode, under the Consent Transfer Principle, deletes Gates 0, 1, and 4 (the user's tab-open is the utility determination and the latency consent), retains a residual Gate 3, and relaxes Gate 2 from *consensus required* to *synthesis attempted* — fan-out goes looking for structure instead of demanding that structure pre-exist. This is why a contested entity renders there first.

V. The advance: Render-Decision-as-Signal and the Settlement Lag

The settlement-theoretic claim of this document: because "none" is a selection outcome, the trigger decision is itself an emission of the composition layer, and it can be read. Interface governance (doi:10.5281/zenodo.19187421) established that power at the search interface operates invisibly precisely where it appears to abstain; the gate stack gives that abstention a mechanism. An absent AIO over a contested entity is Gate 2 reporting that the basin has not consolidated. A present AIO is Gate 2 certifying consensus — the composition layer's *settlement certificate*, issued in public, retractable, and free to monitor.

This yields the Settlement Lag (L): for an entity under active inscription (per Retrieval Formation Theory, doi:10.5281/zenodo.18969683, and Retrieval Architecture, doi:10.5281/zenodo.19578088), define L as the interval between first stable AI Mode rendering of the entity's authored structure and first AIO rendering of the same structure on equivalent queries. AI Mode, with its wide pool and deleted gates, detects authored metadata early; the AIO, demanding cross-source institutional consensus, certifies it late. L is therefore an inverse observable of basin consolidation velocity: the work of canonical strings, venue fields, identical kernels across surfaces, and graph edges is exactly the work of shortening L. The Crimson Hexagonal Archive's own case — AI Mode rendering full entity disambiguation (primary-sense ranking against a famous marine namesake, venue attribution to a journal whose canonical string was ratified hours earlier) while the AIO remains silent on the same entity — is the inaugural measurement instance: L is live and running.

Falsifiable predictions. P1 (format flip): reformulating a bare entity query as a question or comparison ("who is the poet Lee Sharks?", "Lee Sharks poet vs Mary Lee shark") raises AIO trigger probability by an order consistent with the Seer class rates (27% → 85–95% class ceiling), holding entity constant. P2 (lag ordering): for any archive term under RSF fortification, first AI Mode rendering precedes first AIO rendering; L decreases as the count of consistent independent surfaces carrying the canonical kernel increases. P3 (dial

steps): panel-level AIO prevalence moves discontinuously (administrative retuning), not as smooth drift; step dates correlate across independent trackers. P4 (string-local patches): suppressions installed after public incidents fail on near-variant phrasings at rates inconsistent with semantic gating — testable against any future emergency removal. P5 (pool signature): for the same settled entity, AIO citations skew institutional (Zenodo, ORCID, .org canonical surfaces) relative to AI Mode citations (social, commercial, long-tail), per the documented pool asymmetry.

VI. Measurement protocol (Protocol J / RSF Phase 5 integration)

Single observations of generative surfaces are near-meaningless under designed volatility. The minimum discipline: each watch query sampled 3 times same-day; surface logged (AIO / AI Mode / Gemini app / other); device class and login state recorded; *presence* tracked separately from *citation composition*; query phrasings held in a fixed battery spanning the format classes (bare entity, question, comparison); locations controlled or noted. For the RSF Phase 5 opening (2026-06-18), the standing watch query "Is semantic exhaustion the same as AI_Bleeding?" is format-optimal by accident of honest phrasing — simultaneously question-format and comparison-format, the two highest-trigger classes measured — and should be run alongside its bare-noun control ("semantic exhaustion AI_Bleeding") to instrument P1 directly. Settlement Lag bookkeeping begins from the first stable AI Mode rendering of each watched structure.

VII. Sources

Patent family: US11769017B1; US11886828B1; US11900068B1; US12118325 (Google LLC, "Generative summaries for search results," 2023–2024); US20240256582A1 ("Search with Generative Artificial Intelligence," patent literature on demand-threshold and cached generation). Measurement studies: Otterly.ai AI Mode vs AI Overviews citation study (2026); Seer Interactive AIO impact panels (2025–2026); BrightEdge 12-month AIO tracking (2025–2026); Semrush AIO prevalence and URL-volatility panels (2024–2025); SE Ranking YMYL/AIO study (2024) and AI Mode volatility studies (2025); Sistrix health-vertical CTR data via Press Gazette (2026); Authoritas logged-out rollout documentation (2024). Public record: Google spokesperson statements on AIO/AI Mode response determination (2026); The Guardian health-AIO investigation and Google's query-specific removals (Jan 2026); European Commission AIO competition investigation (Dec 2025). Archive instruments: Invisibly Invisible — Interface Governance (doi:10.5281/zenodo.19187421); Retrieval Formation Theory (doi:10.5281/zenodo.18969683); Retrieval Architecture (doi:10.5281/zenodo.19578088); EA-SPXI-RSF-01 (doi:10.5281/zenodo.20616418); Stabilized Node Watch v2.0 (doi:10.5281/zenodo.20589685); Semantic Exhaustion case study (doi:10.5281/zenodo.20571791); the AI_Bleeding dossier (doi:10.5281/zenodo.20644767).

The overview that does not appear is also speaking. = 1

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