

## The Real Read

*What Cannes Lions 2026 was actually doing*

**A note on method.** These sessions are replays; no transcripts exist yet. What follows reads the industry's own framing — the titles it chose, who it put on which stage, what it staged *where*, and what it left out. A transcript tells you what someone said; a programme tells you what an industry is afraid of. Read that way, Cannes 2026 confesses a great deal.

### LEVEL ONE

#### The reassurance consensus

Every AI session sang the same three-note hymn: *AI augments, it doesn't replace; keep the human in the loop; protect trust.* P&G's "robots can't build brands." Hassabis's AI that "respects, empowers and expands." Silverstein's "expands, not replaces."

The tell isn't the message — it's the **unanimity**. When an entire industry recites one creed in one week, you're not watching conviction; you're watching a threatened profession perform its own necessity. Nobody insists robots can't do their job unless the fear is that they can. **The reassurance is the exact size of the anxiety.**

### LEVEL TWO

#### The value-capture war

Strip the creativity language and each session is a positioning move in a distributive fight over the surplus AI releases — who captures the value, and who writes the rules.

**The platforms are building the toll-booth.** OpenAI didn't come to talk creativity; it came to install a phrase — the shift to an "intelligence operating model," AI as "an operating layer across the marketing system." That is a company positioning to be the rentier layer of all marketing: the new Google, taking a cut of intelligence the way Google took a cut of search. Meta, Google DeepMind, LinkedIn and Reddit — Reddit having just floated on the back of selling its users' words to train these very models — are staking the same claim: own the layer, rent it back.

**The incumbents are defending margin.** "Robots can't build brands" is the incantation of the world's largest advertiser, who most benefits from AI's scale and most fears its levelling. **The consultancies are absorbing the craft** — "applied creativity across the organisation" is the fifteen-year swallow completing. And **"responsibility" is being pre-written by the sellers:** a platform naming the "principles guiding responsible commercial participation" is the oldest move in industrial history — self-regulate loudly so someone else doesn't. Tobacco did it. Oil did it with offsets. Finance did it right up until 2008.

And look at where they staged the conscience. The one session carrying real moral weight — a father who lost his daughter to algorithmic harm, beside the UN's information-integrity office — was thirty minutes of "lightning talks" on the secondary stage. The reassurance keynotes held the grand theatre. **A festival's floor plan is its value system:** commerce centre-stage, conscience in the side room.

## The second enclosure

**Trust is being financialised — by the people destroying it.** AI floods the world with synthetic content *and* sells the tools to authenticate it: arsonist and firefighter on one invoice. Edelman — which has sold “trust” as a product since it launched its Barometer at Davos in 2000 — conceding that trust is now “built or eroded beyond a brand’s control” is the confession that a century of manufactured consent is over. Control has passed to platforms (algorithmic discovery) and crowds (communal belief). That panel was a power-transfer ceremony dressed as a debate.

**The human is being quietly disintermediated.** The least-remarked session is the loudest signal: brands now serve “the human buyers they have always served, and now the agents and models that will drive the AI economy.” Follow that arrow — machines making content to persuade machines, the human cut out of both ends. In that world “creativity” becomes a legacy ritual, which is precisely what a beach full of people awarding human genius *while automating it* now is.

**And the geopolitics.** The frontier is American, and it sets the operating layer the world must rent. Europe has no frontier lab, so it reaches for its only lever — law: Article 50, the AI Act and ISO 42001 are sovereignty by regulation. China runs its own bloc; the Global South — and the UK/EU–Africa corridor — appears mostly as talent to source and markets to enter: the least-governed, most-extractable frontier. A heritage house feeding its own archive into a platform’s AI to “decode what endures” is data colonialism of a brand’s own past.

When a technology makes a value infinite, the incumbents don’t fight the technology. They financialise the scarcity it creates.

AI makes *content* infinite, and therefore worthless. So the industry re-prices whatever remains scarce — trust, provenance, authorship, judgement — and builds new toll-booths around each. “Infinite idea engines.” Marketing as “a product, not an expense.” The literal language of turning a cost centre into an asset class. Every session, read correctly, is someone staking a claim to a piece of the newly scarce.

Governance is not the antidote to this enclosure. Governance is the newest enclosure.

Whoever owns the standard of proof — the audit, the disclosure format, the evidence pack, the certification — owns the new toll-booth. Article 50, ISO 42001 and the platforms’ “responsibility principles” are not only protections; they are the property regime of the AI economy, being drafted in real time. The question humming under every session was never “is AI good for creativity.” It was: who will own the means of verification?

### THE TURN

## What this means if you’re building with AI

If governance is the newest enclosure, then the brands that win are the ones who **own their proof** rather than inherit it. Three implications:

1. **Treat trust as a produced asset.** “Human-in-the-loop” is not a defence; a record is. From 2026, Article 50 makes disclosing AI-generated content a duty, not a value statement — you will need to show who decided what, and what the model did.

2. **Don't let the seller mark its own homework.** Verification supplied by the firm selling you the AI is marketing. Independent proof is the only kind a board, a regulator and a buyer will accept.
3. **The hardest ground is where it pays most.** In volatile, regulated, cross-border categories — fintech, payments, the UK/EU–Africa corridor — proof is the differentiator, not the drag.

#### HOW JUBA & ASSOCIATES HELPS

We build the independent proof layer — an AI inventory, a risk triage, disclosure that satisfies Article 50, and a board-ready evidence pack — translated across the EU AI Act, ISO/IEC 42001, NIST AI RMF and the corridor's own regimes. We start with a fixed-fee **QuickScan**: where your AI exposure sits, and the three things to fix first. We don't sell AI ethics — we turn "trust us" into proof you own.