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Matthew Keegan | Jul 8, 2025

# Cannes Lions, AI, and the integrity reckoning

The first ever Cannes Lions Grand Prix withdrawal for AI misuse signals a watershed moment, but is this just the beginning of a much bigger reckoning for marketing in the AI age?



Cannes Lions is no stranger to controversy, but this year the debate took on a distinctly AI-shaped form. For years, award shows like Cannes Lions have struggled with agencies entering scam ads, overstating effectiveness, or even fabricating results to win accolades. Yet, this was the first time a Grand Prix winner was withdrawn because AI was used to generate and manipulate content.

The most notable **fallout** involved DDB-owned Brazilian agency DM9. Their 'Efficient Way to Pay' campaign for Whirlpool's Consul brand was stripped of both its Creative Data Grand Prix and a Bronze Lion in Creative Commerce after the agency admitted to using AI-generated and manipulated footage in the case study, simulating real-world results and misleading the jury.

AI technology, now pervasive in the industry, continues to divide opinion. Some, especially in Silicon Valley, praise its potential, while others fear it could upend everything from jobs to personal identity. AI can mimic language, create art, and gather intellectual property, introducing new ways to manipulate work that can win a Grand Prix, if only temporarily.



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In an era where it's increasingly difficult to distinguish real from fake, AI is amplifying those concerns and infiltrating the production and presentation of award entries. If AI can be used to create convincing but false narratives, how do we safeguard the credibility of our industry?

"AI technology is providing these bad actors with more opportunities to fake and falsify entries," says Darren Woolley, founder and global CEO of Trinity P3. "Award show organisers will need to up their game in detecting these entries before they are judged, rather than waiting for them to gain notoriety and then have their validity questioned."

Woolley believes award show companies must invest in detecting new and more sophisticated scams and invalid entries, rather than relying on the industry to do their validation work for them. "If they don't, then continued bad publicity will undermine the integrity and value of these awards, and they risk their rivers of entry fee gold diminishing to a trickle."

One thing is clear: AI's creeping influence is generating ethical grey zones. Are creatives and agencies consciously trying to deceive the jury by hiding AI use in 'real' work? Is AI-generated work now so seamless and commonplace that even juries (and clients) can't tell the difference anymore? And who's ultimately responsible for disclosing AI's role—the agency, the platform, or the festival?

"This isn't about AI, it's about integrity," says Steve Walls, CSO of Moon Rabbit. "Agencies are incentivised (by holding companies) to win at awards shows. They've always cheated to do it. AI is their way of making the lie less detectable."

In response to the DM9 controversy, Cannes Lions **announced** a series of enhanced measures to ensure the awards remain robust in the era of generative AI. These include mandatory AI disclosure, content detection tools, and an AI ethics committee. But the real question is: Will these measures be enough to restore faith? Or is this just the beginning of a much bigger reckoning for marketing in the AI age?

Walls is skeptical. "So long as it's 'win or die' back at the agency people will be cheating. AI is just a new way to lie, especially in an era where the case study means more than the work. So long as agencies are shameless liars, cheats and perjurers the problem will persist. Personally, I'd ban case studies. And award shows."

### Integrity as an imperative

There's no doubting the immense pressure on agencies. When it comes to awards, reputations and careers are at stake. But how can agencies balance the competitive pressure to innovate with the imperative to uphold integrity and authenticity in an era where AI can easily blur those boundaries?

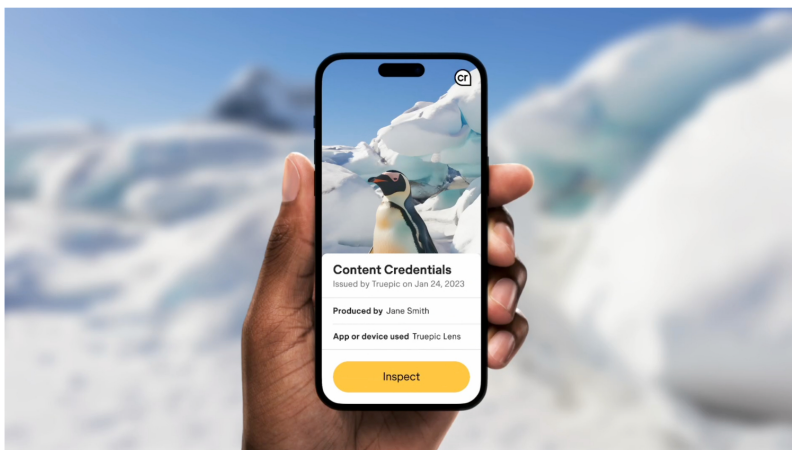
"Transparency isn't a burden; it's a baseline," says Shai Luft, co-founder & COO, Bench Media. "Not disclosing AI is like entering a marathon on a motorbike. If AI helped generate the idea, write the script, or build the visuals, say it. It doesn't diminish the work but pretending it was all human craftsmanship does."

Integrity means being honest about how the work was made. If we're not clear on that, we're not just bending the rules, we're eroding trust in the ideas themselves.

"It's pretty simple: generate a great idea, put it out into the real world where it impacts real people, measure that impact, then tell the fucking truth when it comes to reporting what you did and what you achieved," says Simon Lee, CCO of Enigma. "If a jury deems your work to be worthy of an award: congratulations, you deserve it. If you don't, no dramas—you'll still have the satisfaction of a job done well, and what's more you'll have integrity."

Recent controversies have only made the call for accountability louder.

The industry isn't operating in a vacuum. From watermarking protocols like **C2PA**, to frameworks like **Creative Commons' new CC Signals**, to government disclosure mandates across the US, EU, and China, the call for accountability is only getting louder. Award bodies, advertisers, and agencies should get ahead of the curve.



With protocols like C2PA, creators can choose to attach Content Credentials to their content, which might include things like whether AI was used or not.

"If AI is shaping the work, it should show up in the credits. Anything else is creative amnesia," says Ben Cooper, global executive director, AI Products, R/GA. "While we're still defining the boundaries of this new creative frontier, disclosure is essential. Not as a punishment, but as a marker of how we treat the craft. Because when you're proud of the process, you don't need to hide it."

Organisations like Creative Commons and C2PA are already leading the way, building frameworks for attribution and ethical AI use, not as compliance checklists, but as creative catalysts.

"Because AI isn't a shortcut. It's not a cheat code. It's a new medium," adds Cooper. "And like any medium, the magic lies in how you use it, with intention, with taste, with creative direction that starts and ends with human vision."



Camilla Gleditsch, head of agency communications, BBDO Asia, notes that while agencies are under pressure to move fast and try new things, they also have a responsibility to innovate with intention, not just to chase speed or headlines, but to actually add value.

"The challenge isn't about using AI—it's about using it well. That means knowing when to lean in, and when to pause. It means asking 'why?' before we jump to 'how?'" says Gleditsch. "This isn't a fling—it's a long-term partnership. AI is fast becoming our second spouse at work. It listens, responds, even surprises us. But like any good marriage, it only thrives when there's clarity, intention, and strong communications."

#### The human + AI approach

Love it or loathe it, AI isn't going anywhere. The question is how to move forward in a way that doesn't undermine trust. Where do we draw the line between creative storytelling and factual integrity?

"Move fast, with guardrails," says Simon Lesch, head of AI & transformation, Archetype. "We use GenAI to accelerate the 'boring' 80 per cent (first drafts, summaries, variant generation), then keep human judgement for anything that shapes meaning or reputation. We call it 'Human + AI' approach. In short, chase the efficiency upside but bake transparency, privacy and a 'human final cut' into every project."

Cannes this year highlighted how not to use AI, showing it can be used to lie, cheat, and deceive. Perhaps no number of measures, ethics committees, or disclaimers will be enough to prevent those determined to bend the rules. But Cannes also showed that instead of ignoring AI, it's about how we frame it.

"It was great to see the winning campaigns fixing issues or having a real utility, opening new cashflows and tangible ROI, but also not necessarily sacrificing craft, emotion and social responsibility," says Andy Lima, CCO at Think HQ. "I believe there's still room to uphold integrity and authenticity in this era. It will definitely be a balancing act, but AI is demonstrating a new frontier for creativity, where new business models, greater inclusion and sustainable growth can co-exist."

Ultimately, it's not just about what AI can do, it's about the choices you make in how you use it.

"If you're pushing boundaries with AI, be clear about it. Innovation moves fast. But trust is what keeps it meaningful," says Cooper. "And if you're experimenting in the dark, you're missing the chance to lead."

Source: [Campaign Asia](#)

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