

What the LA fires teach us about news

Jodie Hopperton
International News
Media Association

Who am I and why am I here?



Jodie Hopperton

*Product & Tech Initiative Lead
International News Media
Association (INMA)*



The New York Times

trint



EMBLEMATIC.
REACH BEYOND

FORE



The LA fires: it's personal

Lunchtime, Tues Jan 7



Nighttime, Tuesday Jan 7



Morning Weds Jan 8



A media diet in an emergency

Where did we go?

Two sources shone through:

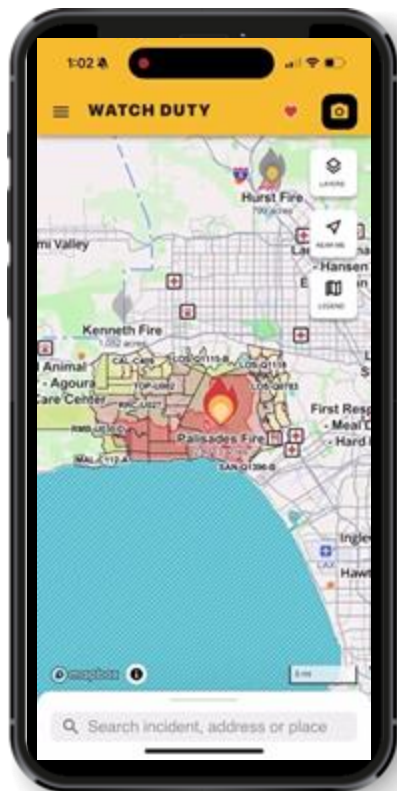
1. Local TV news
2. Watch Duty

We discovered that

- there were unexpected sources of trust
- local news played an important role
- service journalism shone through

Unexpected source of truth

Watch Duty: a wildfire tracking app



Downloads: 2.5 million users in 7 days

Why?

- A well respected non profit, NGO run by volunteers
- A source of unbiased truth
- Answered local questions: Where is the fire? How contained? Where are evacuations?
- Bonus layers such as winds and air quality

Local news had a moment

Local broadcast delivered

Nielsen reported:

- On Jan. 7 **1+ million** in LA tuned in to local news.
- Broadcast audiences **doubled or tripled.**
- Almost **17-fold jump (+1,693%)** in online impressions of L.A. TV news content

Why?

- Visual story
- Constant updates , news every second
- Local information for local people



LA Times saw massive gains

By the numbers:

- The LA Times' website experienced an **800% increase in traffic**
- Monthly Visitors **Doubled**
- **259% increase in new digital subscriptions**

Los Angeles Times

'LIKE A THOUSAND FIRES'

WIND-DRIVEN BLAZES DESTROY HOMES; AT LEAST 5 DEAD

PALISADES FIRE: Some residents who fled are anxious to see if houses survived

EATON FIRE: 32,500 told to evacuate as 10,600 acres burn in Altadena, Pasadena

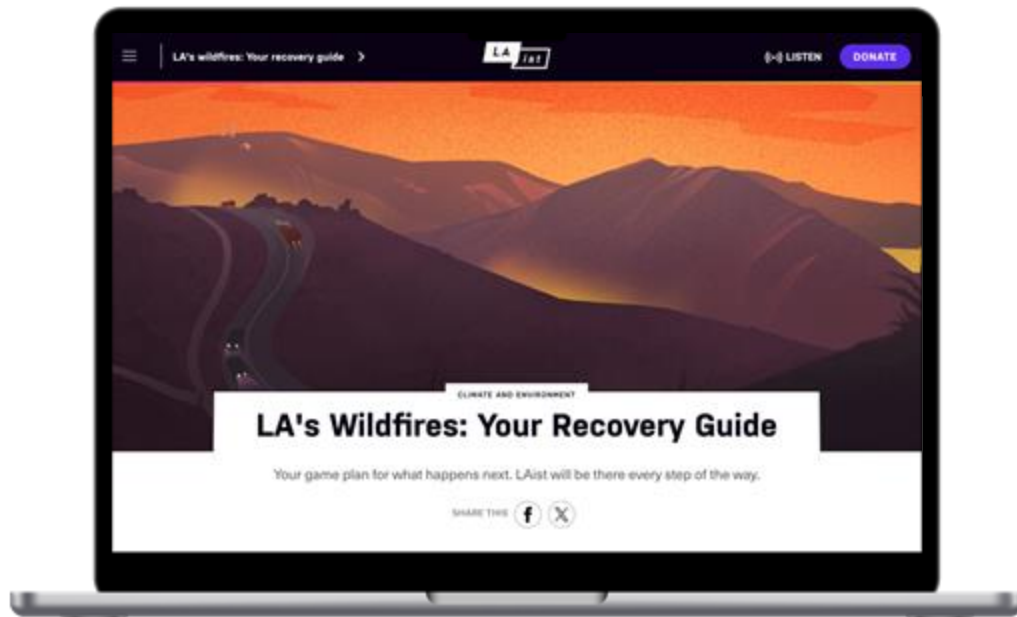


STEVE BALZARIN / AP WireImage / Getty Images. A person looks on as a house burns during the Eaton fire Wednesday in Altadena.

Local radio also gained

LAist (NPR affiliate)

- Daily readership **20X normal** in the week the fires broke out
- Stayed at **400% above average** the following weeks
- Added **10,000 daily newsletter** sign ups



Staying power

Local media stayed.
They help give context to the aftermath:
The effect of the rain and the runoff.
The water quality.
The beaches.
The housing issues.
The permitting.
The rebuilding.



How it played out on social media

Huge reach across all platforms



#PalisadesFire peaked at **#4 worldwide** on Jan 8 with over **120,000 tweets**

“California” saw about **1.9 million tweets**

Combined, wildfire-related tweets reached a huge audience – trending worldwide implies **tens of millions** of impressions across users’ feeds.



#CaliforniaWildfires was used in over **63,000 Instagram posts**

A broader hashtag like **#wildfires** (not limited to L.A.) shows around **246,000 posts**

High engagement and shares with media and celebrities resulted in hundreds of thousands, of likes/reactions.



#PalisadesFire went **viral**, with some clips topping **7.5 million views in just 2 days.**

Wildfire-related hashtags translated into **millions of video views** – a key measure of reach on that platform.

Individual hashtag view counters aren’t publicly listed, the cumulative views undoubtedly reach into the **tens of millions**



A satellite image of the LA Fires got the most interactions: **56.8k comments and 61k shares.** And this local ABC7 aerial video which ultimately got **48m views.**

The most interactions for keywords around the fires on Facebook were **image or video posts**, not link posts.

(Newswhip 2025)



One Snapchat video of the Palisades Fire received **673 million views**

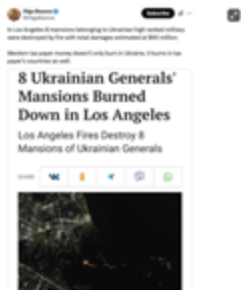
90 posts

 **Product & Tech Initiative**

Social spread false narratives

Russian false claims: Ukrainian military officials owned eight mansions that burned down in the wildfires.

NewsGuard



8 Ukrainian Generals' Mansions Burned Down in Los Angeles

Taylor Swift claims: A video shows the pop star saying the wildfires were "divine retribution" for U.S. actions in Ukraine.

American and also claims saying that the Los Angeles fire is actually God's punishment and God's revenge.

"Taylor Swift considers the fire to be the result of the most brutal aggression on Israel and American financial aid."



Below is a catalog of false narratives related to the Southern California wildfires:

MYTH: Sixty Oregon fire trucks sent to fight 2025 Southern California wildfires were blocked from entering California because of emissions testing



MYTH: California officials and executives from State Farm and other insurance companies planned the 2025 Southern California fires to destroy child-trafficking tunnels



MYTH: The Los Angeles Fire Department lacked the equipment to fight the 2025 Southern California wildfires because of its donations to Ukraine



False DEI claim: The L.A. Fire Department chief said her top priority is diversity, equity, and inclusion.



False "denial" claim: A viral video shows firefighters dancing in celebration as Los Angeles burns in the background.



Service journalism came into play

Community action



People needed destinations that brought them together to help:

- *Who needs help?*
- *What was needed?*
- *Where to drop items?*
- *How could you volunteer?*

This was on **social platforms** and on **messaging apps**.

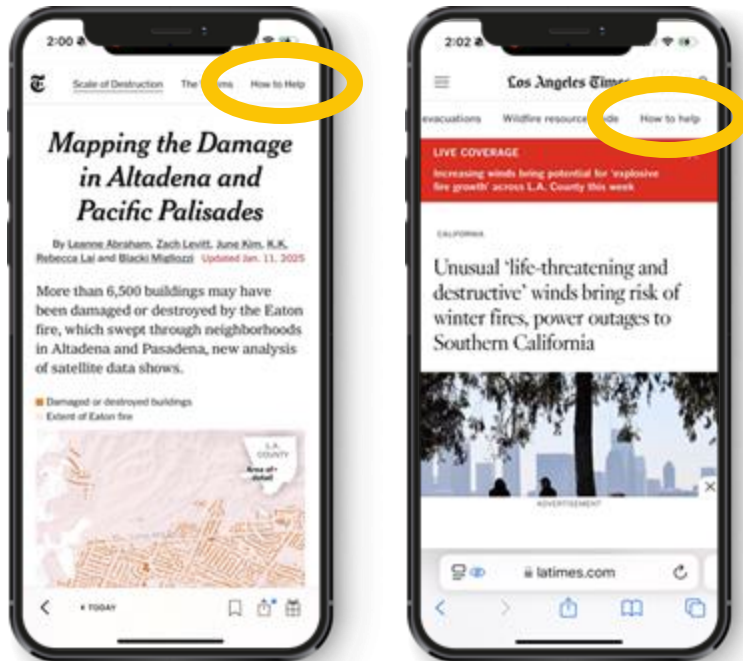


Publishers showed *How to help*

The NYTimes and LA Times both showcased a new tab: **How to help**

Why?

Because aside from wanting to be updated, they recognised that their **audience felt helpless** and **wanted to do something**.



What does this mean for you?

Where does news fit?

News is one part of the **information ecosystem**.

Which is distributed across **many platforms**.



What is news anyway?

Journalism is more than **data**. It's **context**. It's **relevance**. It's **expertise**. It's **making sense of things**.

It's not what we label it.
It's what your **communities need**.

If there is *one* takeaway from this

Think less about what you **do**.
And more about what your users **need**.



This is true for your **content** and your **products**.

Thank you!



Jodie Hopperton

Product & Tech Initiative Lead
International News Media Association

jodie.hopperton@inma.org