



California Local News Fellowship:

Case Study 3: The Los Angeles Wildfires

April 2025

Background

The California Local News Fellowship is a state-funded program designed to increase the capacity of local newsrooms and support early career journalists. The ultimate goal is to ensure that California communities, particularly underserved communities, have reliable access to high quality news and information so that they can make informed decisions about matters that affect their lives and the health of their communities. Impact Architects is conducting a series of case studies to highlight the value of California Local News Fellows to California communities. This is the third case study, focusing on coverage of the wildfires affecting communities in and around Los Angeles in January 2025.

In January 2025, Los Angeles county—the most populous county in California (and the U.S.)—experienced wildfires across the region. The fires affected large swathes of the area, devastated neighborhoods, and will continue to reshape communities as the process of recovery and rebuilding gets underway. The fourteen California Local News Fellows that are based in this region, ten in Los Angeles County, two more in Orange County to the south, and one in Ventura County to the north, provided critical coverage to California communities about the wildfires. And, given the structure of the program, they were uniquely positioned to share information, collaborate, and both provide and access necessary support as they reported on these traumatic events.

Impact Architects spoke with six fellows who covered the fires and who are placed in a variety of newsrooms—large and small, nonprofit and commercial—and serving diverse audiences—international and hyperlocal, English speaking and non-English speaking. While the fellows' experiences were unique, they share common themes that exemplify the purpose of the California Local News Fellowship.

- **Professional preparedness:** The extraordinary aspect of the fellows' preparedness was just how ordinary it was: They were doing a job they've been training to do. Fellows said that working in a newsroom every day prepared them to quickly respond to the event. At the same time, they note that no amount of experience could prepare one for seeing the scale of destruction wrought by the fires.

- **Centering people and communities:** The fellows approached the coverage with sensitivity, particularly when engaging with people in the midst of crisis.
- **Collaboration and support:** The California Local News Fellowship's model established easy communication among its cohorts of early career journalists. This communication facilitated sharing information and offering support to one another, which was essential due to the personal and professional challenges of covering a crisis in one's own and surrounding communities.

The Los Angeles Wildfires and Local News

Times of crisis highlight the value of local news, as well as challenges. The wildfires in Los Angeles were no different. [According to Nielsen](#), consumption of local broadcast news dramatically increased during the crisis. "During the LA fires, local news became a lifeline for millions," peaking at 1.1 billion minutes spent with local news via television and streaming on January 8 alone. Nielsen also reports a spike in radio consumption over the same time period. They concluded:

When the stakes are high, trust becomes paramount. Social media provided timely updates, but also saw instances of misinformation creating confusion. Faced with this challenge, audiences turned to local media for fact-checked, reliable updates.

Other media observers similarly observed the critical role local news played in communities during the Los Angeles wildfires, as well as the need to overcome misinformation and disinformation on social media. Michael Schneider of [Variety Magazine wrote that](#), "More than ever, the L.A. fires remind us why we need a vibrant framework of broadcast, print and online journalism." [Defector's Diana Moskovitz wrote from personal experience](#), but she also tied her reliance on local news for critical information during the wildfires to the broader agenda of saving local journalism so that during the next crisis, reliable information is there. She neatly described how different media contribute to value in a crisis:

I know local TV news will tell me when to evacuate, and I know local radio will keep me informed during the drive if we do need to go; later, local newspapers and digital shops will do their best to figure out what happened with all those promises made under duress by the government.

Notably, Moskovitz's appeal was in favor of state support for local journalism. While federal support for local journalism is unrealistic at this moment, state support, such as exists for the California Local News Fellowship, is an example of how public policy can strengthen local journalism to serve communities in times of crisis. The fellows we spoke with are a part of the

news ecosystem of trusted outlets that are there to provide useful information to communities in a time of crisis.

Preparation

The fellows discussed three levels of preparation: Professional, emotional, and logistical. On a professional level, the fellows indicate that they were well prepared to cover the fires. The fellowship has given them the tools to respond to any story based on their newsroom's priorities, so in this respect the fires were like any other story, but of a greater magnitude. Regarding emotional preparedness, the fellows note that covering the fires took an emotional toll, which one can only prepare for in the abstract and mostly requires support afterward. Finally, logistically, the fellows say that they could have used more information about personal protective equipment and what else might be needed when working so close to wildfires. The newsrooms weren't necessarily equipped to provide this information or equipment.

Professional preparedness

Andrew Lopez from Boyle Heights Beat, a hyperlocal digital outlet that covers the eastside neighborhood of Los Angeles, said that he knew the numbers to call and the process to take when responding to the story, such as reaching out to local utility providers to understand the impact on Los Angeles communities that were not immediately threatened by the fires. Samantha Norris of the San Fernando Valley Sun, which covers an array of Los Angeles neighborhoods and adjacent cities, said that she was professionally prepared because of the cumulative build up of everything she's learned on the job so far. Like Lopez, Norris said that she knew who to reach out to and what to do when it became apparent that her audience needed information, which is something that would have been challenging at the beginning of the fellowships. **"You don't always realize how experience is building up your skillset," she said, "but then you're faced with the moment and you're able to do it."**

Emotional preparedness

While the fellows were prepared to handle the job of reporting about the wildfires, there was no way to mentally and emotionally prepare for seeing the devastation firsthand. For example, Victoria Ivie of the O.C. Register said that, **"There's nothing that can really prepare you for seeing the actual damage, and seeing people's livelihoods in ash and dust."** Michelle Zacarias from CALÓ News, a bilingual publication serving Latino communities in Los Angeles, tied the inability to prepare emotionally with her distinct ability to be professionally prepared. **"It was actually a lot emotionally to process in the moment," she said, "but I just kind of had to go into this with blinders on for a little bit and just do what I needed to do."** In addition to the necessary compartmentalization, Zacarias said that the experience highlighted that she can never truly detach the person she is from her journalistic lens. Understanding that helped her process emotions while also helping her provide valuable reporting to CALÓ News's audience.

Logistical preparedness

According to the [World Resources Institute](#), the Palisades and Eaton fires that started in January 2025 were two of the most destructive wildfires in California history. So although wildfires are common in California, their magnitude was uncommon. As a result, many of the fellows were not necessarily trained to cover wildfires at this scale, and newsrooms were not necessarily equipped to provide safety information and equipment. Vitaly Ataev Troshin of Slavic Sacramento—a publication written in Russian, Ukrainian, and English, serving communities in California, the U.S., and internationally—said that when he was instructed to travel to the Los Angeles area to cover the wildfires, he didn't even think about bringing a facemask to protect himself from air pollution. Isaac Ceja of La Opinión, a Spanish-speaking newspaper serving all of Los Angeles County, said that while his newsroom had done some fire coverage in the past, nobody on staff had the safety training to report on wildfires in close proximity. The fellow who felt most prepared in terms of safety, Michelle Zacarias, was so because of personal experience rather than from support from her newsroom. **As climate disasters become more prevalent, particularly in places that hadn't been threatened in the recent past, it would be worthwhile for the California Local News Fellowship to consider offering broad safety training to fellows and newsrooms for reporting in such situations.**

Reporting Approach

Two themes emerged from the Fellows about their approaches to covering the LA fires. First, fellows highlighted the importance of taking a human-centered approach to reporting, particularly when seeking out people to talk on the record. Doing so required a great deal of sensitivity, as these sources were facing so much personal tragedy. Second, fellows did not want all of the coverage to be negative and about the destruction of neighborhoods. While the devastation to infrastructure and livelihoods could not be ignored, they also wanted to highlight resilience, as well as provide solutions-oriented reporting that provided information about available resources.

Human-centered approach

All of the fellows we spoke with highlighted the importance of talking to sources with sensitivity and ensuring that their interactions and subsequent reporting was not extractive. This manifested in numerous ways, such as allowing sources to approach them rather than seeking comment from every person they came across, letting people talk and ask questions without orienting the conversation toward a predetermined theme, giving people breaks when talking, or simply leaving contact information and letting people follow-up if they wished. These might be considered best practices for journalism in general, but they become even more important for building trust with communities in times of crisis because they show that journalists are there to serve, rather than take from, communities, and they result in higher quality journalism.

For example, several fellows mentioned that because the press were allowed access to affected areas while others were not, they had people ask them to check-in on their homes. Depending on the situation, they were able to do so. In one instance, Michelle Zacarias said that when she visited Altadena, someone asked her to check on the status of the home and the well-being of their father, who stayed behind to protect the house. Zacarias got their phone number and drove by the house, which she found standing with the father and some neighbors present. After talking to the father, she learned that he was an immigrant who had spent a great deal of time renovating and building the house, considering it his and his family's legacy. The conversation resulted in [a story for CALÓ News](#) that Zacarias credits to the relationship building evident in taking a human-centered approach. **"Before I'm a reporter, I'm a human being," Zacarias said, "and that's always going to be my approach to journalism."**

Stories of resilience and aid

As an extension of the human-centered approach to journalism, fellows produced solutions-oriented reporting. Specifically, many stories focused on two salient questions: What resources do people need to be aware of, and what are people doing to support one another? Regarding resources, several fellows wrote guides about federal and local resources that might be available, as well as guides for which alerts to sign up for to receive trusted information about evacuations. The stories about how people are supporting one another are more varied. [Victoria Ivie](#) and [Samantha Norris](#) both wrote stories about mutual aid among communities, which highlights community resilience and also identifies a source of potential support. Andrew Lopez wrote about a [nonprofit raising funds](#) to support businesses and workers who could not be outdoors during the fires. Ivie also wrote a story about [Black hairstylists and barbers offering free services](#) for victims of the Eaton fire. These themes—where can I find support, and how are people supporting one another—exemplify the value of local journalism in general, and why it's even more critical in times of crisis. Speaking of her experience, Norris said: **"There was a lot of devastation. But it was also one of the most beautiful times I've witnessed because there was so much outpouring of love, care, and mutual aid. It showed the spirit of Angelenos and how they show up."**

Without saying so directly, California Local News Fellows and their colleagues in the local news industry also showed up in their professional capacity and played a role.

Collaboration

While many reporters across the Los Angeles region and the state have relationships, the California Local News Fellows are directly connected through the structure of the fellowship program. The program provides channels for communication among fellows and encourages, but in no way requires or monitors, collaboration and support among fellows. The primary channel for communication among fellows is a Slack team. The fellows used this for two purposes: To

coordinate resource sharing and collaboration and as a way to check-in on the well-being of their colleagues.

While covering the LA fires, there was persistent communication among the fellows. For instance, Vitaly Ataev Troshin said that he shared video he took for his outlet, including drone footage that other fellows may not have been able to take on their own. Michelle Zacarias mentioned resource sharing, such as pointing other fellows to sources she'd developed. She said that, in general, if a fellow needs to find a potential source's contact information, they will ask each other. Finally, Zacarias said that she did connect with another fellow to visit a fire site together while they each conducted their own independent reporting.

This informal collaboration is a useful alternative to formal collaboration, meaning co-reporting, sharing bylines, and/or sharing resources, which can be quite challenging. Collaborative projects are time consuming and require a great deal of coordination and buy-in from newsrooms. When asked why he didn't collaborate with others for reporting on the wildfires, Issac Ceja said it was because of the, "Tight deadlines for fellowship. So I like to focus as much time as I can on interviewing and reporting so I can write." **Formal collaboration might be too much to expect for early career journalists who are building a foundation for a future career, but they have shown that they view their peers as resources for more informal support.**

When we asked about collaboration, more fellows said that the fellowship network was most valuable for emotional support. Victoria Ivie said that she would frequently check-in on fellows on Slack to see how they were doing while covering the wildfires. She also found it to be a place for commiseration. Samantha Norris said that, "A lot of what helped was the emotional and mental support from fellows during that time." She continued: **"They were helpful in listening and talking through stuff I was feeling. Having that network does help, especially one that does the same kind of work and understands what it is we're all going through."** Ideally, this form of support is the foundation of sturdy relationships and future support among colleagues.

The story isn't over

Local journalism is crucial at times of crisis because it can cut through misinformation and disinformation and provide timely, reliable, and useful information to residents. It's also crucial because, unlike national news outlets that provide coverage during the crisis, local news typically continues reporting after the fact. The Los Angeles wildfires are no longer a national story, but California Local News Fellows continue to cover the aftermath.

Samantha Norris said that she's focused on reporting on the difficult process of recovery, including what rebuilding looks like and who it is for. She notes that people are still struggling with insurance companies, and the mass displacement of individuals will likely change the face of communities. Victoria Ivie is thinking about other forms of long-term impact, such as how the

wildfires will affect local education and student test scores. And similar to Norris, she's considering the way the wildfires will change the fabric of the community, as neighborhoods with multigenerational families have lost homes. Will they be there for rebuilding? What will it look like? Finally, Isaac Ceja considered a question not talked about as much: The homes that didn't burn down. He's seen evidence of survivor's guilt, which sometimes is channeled into help for others who were not as fortunate.

Continued coverage like the fellows mentioned requires connection and familiarity with the communities being served. Ivie additionally said that the experience covering the wildfires "reinforced that being involved with communities you live near, through work or not, helps in times like this because you already know some context but can learn so much more." Finally, Norris, who grew up in Altadena, said that the work "truly made me realize how important it was for me to be here in a place I've grown up in and cover communities I'm familiar with." She continued: **"It made me appreciate being here and being able to serve a place I hold so dear."**