LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

LOS ANGELES WILDFIRES: BIPOC MEDIA ARE TELLING STORIES OTHER MEDIA AREN'T

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LAURA FLANDERS: Fires, climate change, political change, and more. Whatever the story, as a friend of ours likes to say, the other story is always the media. So here at "Laura Flanders & Friends," we focus once a month on news coverage. Specifically, we visit with journalists from the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color press to hear what they are bringing to the story. To host this episode this time is Kadia Tubman of Scripps News. Kadia has been a regular co-host on this feature, but today she's hosting for the very first time. Here's Kadia Tubman.

KADIA TUBMAN: Thanks, Laura. It's great to be back. As of this recording, catastrophic wildfires in Los Angeles, California have claimed at least 27 lives and ripped through populated urban areas, displacing thousands of residents who lost homes, jobs, and communities in what is being considered one of the most destructive fires in Los Angeles history, and may even become the costliest wildfire in US history with a projected economic loss of up to $270 billion. Now, at the height of the emergency, over 200,000 residents in Los Angeles County were under evacuation orders. And the two most destructive fires, the Pacific Palisades and the Eaton Fire, were still burning with new fires emerging, leaving thousands at risk with toxic air and water. Now the cause of the fires is not yet known, but the unusually dry season points to the disastrous effects of climate change and the oil and gas industry that fuels climate disasters. So how is the media reporting on the communities dealing with this immeasurable loss and what is the path to recovery for the city? Joining us are two Los Angeles journalists to talk about what they are reporting on from there. Cerise Castle reports on civil rights, criminal justice, and climate. She wrote the first history of deputy gangs inside the LA County Sheriff's Department, which she talked about on the show. Her work has been featured in the LA Times, Vanity Fair, NPR, and ABC. She is exploring the environmental impact the fires have had in communities such as Altadena. Jacqueline García is a senior reporter at CALÓ News focused on immigration, politics, and issues affecting the Latino population. She's reporting on the inspiring organizing of the day laborers and immigrant community in Pasadena. Welcome to you both. Thank you for being here. Right now, we want to know what is on your hearts and minds in this moment. So, Cerise, I would like to start with you.

CERISE CASTLE: This is a traumatizing moment for not just myself, but for the entire county of Los Angeles. These fires were unprecedented. The damage has burned homes, businesses, places of worship in an area of 60 square miles. Thousands of people have lost everything. It's devastating, it's unprecedented, and it is a heavy moment in the city right now.

KADIA TUBMAN: Jacqueline, how about you? Where is your heart and mind in this moment?

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: One of the things that caught my attention the most is that yes, it's devastating, what is going on, but now that we're putting faces into the stories, I think that it makes it more important. When I started my reporting, I was going to cover one story about the work that day laborers are doing, and I realized that there are so many stories that need to be told because every person has been affected. Like, they have a story to tell, and it's very important for us as reporters to say.

KADIA TUBMAN: What are you seeing in the communities where you're reporting? What is standing out to you most? And I want to start with you, Jacqueline, because you just mentioned that.

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: Definitely. One of the things that caught attention a lot is the fact that when the news broke, they were talking a lot about the Palisades, the Pacific Palisades, which are homes that they range on the millions. So there was some kind of comments from people saying that, "Oh, rich people are losing their homes, rich people are losing their homes." But when we went to the Eaton fire in Altadena, we were able to see that the reality was different. A lot of middle income, low-income families, immigrant families, undocumented families lost their homes. And having to see that devastation and having to see that they have nowhere to go, and they probably don't have the resources that some people in the Palisades have, and I'm not saying that it's right or wrong, either way it's bad. But just having this resources and the information, I think that it is something very important that this community in Altadena, due to the Eaton fire, should have, and that's what we're trying to report.

KADIA TUBMAN: Cerise, how about you? What are you seeing in the communities where you report?

CERISE CASTLE: Well, like Jacqueline said, I think, initially, that there was a lot of disparity in coverage. A lot of the local coverage and national coverage was focused on the Palisades fire. And we saw a lot of stories coming out of Altadena, Pasadena, which, as Jacqueline said, largely working class, largely communities of color. Subsequently, though, I am glad to see that there has been a course correction by both local and national media to bring these stories to the forefront. Not just talking about high-income earners in the Palisades that have lost million-dollar homes, but talking about the babysitters, the grocery shopkeepers, the renters, in fact, that were living in apartments that lost everything in the Eaton fire. That coverage is so important. Los Angeles is made up of so many different communities, of so many ethnic racial backgrounds, so many kinds of income. It's important to remember that this disaster affected people from all walks of life.

KADIA TUBMAN: What are you seeing, Cerise, when it comes to the immediate threats to these residents that you just pointed out, there are different, and of course we may not be able to cover how they are all individually affected, but what are you seeing as the immediate threats to residents and the city right now?

CERISE CASTLE: Well, of course there's the fire itself. The smoke that is generated from events like these is, you know, dangerous in the best of circumstances. But when we're looking at the Eaton fire specifically, this fire burned through an area which had homes that were built many, many years ago, using substances that have since been banned. Things like asbestos and lead. And when those structures burned, the chemicals associated with those toxic materials were released into the air. And they are still in the air, in that toxic ash that is still continuing to fall every day, landing on cars, landing on streets, landing on dirt in people's backyards, landing on playground structures where children are going out and playing. And, unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be any concentrated effort by city government in that area, county government in that area to call attention to this toxicity that is not only living in the air, but is going to permeate into the soil and into the water. Instead, we're seeing government agencies encouraging people to repopulate these areas. And there is no concentrated effort by municipal government to do cleaning of houses, to do remediation of soil, and to do any kind of monitoring of the health of people that are going back to these areas that very likely will see some sort of adverse health effects. And it's not just people living in the immediate burned area, these toxic materials are in ash that is falling all over Los Angeles County, winds are propelling it beyond Los Angeles County. So really anyone within really a 60-mile radius of these fires, possibly even more, is in grave danger.

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: I was just visiting the Pasadena Community Job Center, where I have been doing my stories from the day labor workers, and one of the things that they are worried about is the fact that, like Cerise mentioned, they are encouraged to repopulate, to go back to their homes.And they were saying like some of the children are going back to those homes. They're helping their parents do the cleanup with no masks, no gloves. And they were getting to see that they are picking up all these chemicals, all these trash that yes, it's dangerous for your health. But because they are not being provided with the right resources, they're not being provided with the right information on how to take care of themselves. The only thing that they're worrying about right now is to continue having a roof under their heads and having a place to live, because that moment when everybody was evacuated last minute and without anything. So it was very important for them to go back and continue living their lives. So for those who are able to, I think that they are just worrying about cleaning the house without caring so much about the proper process. And I think that that's something that we should look into a little bit more.

KADIA TUBMAN: That's a great point. I do want to ask you a little bit more about the Pasadena Community Job Center. Can you tell us a little bit more about that and your involvement, especially centering around these wildfires?

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: The Pasadena Community Job Center, it's located about, I want to say, three to four miles of distance from where the Eaton fire started. This is a job center where usually day laborers come every day. And we're talking about gardeners, construction workers, handymen, women that clean houses, babysitters. So they come every day and they look for a job there. So when the situation happened, one of the trees fell in front of their center. Because some of them already know how to do work, like gardening and stuff like that, so they started cleaning in front. They started cutting the tree and they started fixing it just because they wanted to help in any way possible because the city wasn't gonna be able to do it right away. When we start doing this activity, the day laborers said, "You know, we want to do it as volunteers," because they organize themselves. So that's when we came with the fire brigade. It was a group of jornaleros, a group of day laborers that organize themselves doing these community cleanups in solidarity with the community. So that situation led to them, like, trying to do a little bit more because then they started realizing that the devastation was just not in their immediate area, but also, like, it was expanded more. I mean, like if you went there right after the fire happened, you could see trees, branches, leaves, a lot of trash on the streets, but I'm talking about tons of trash everywhere. So what these workers did, like they started as a volunteer work to start cleaning on their own, but then they started calling people to the point that now every day they have about 500 volunteers that they go and they are helping to clean all these debris, all these trees and branches and all the trash that is out there.

KADIA TUBMAN: I would be remiss to not mention the current climate that we're in right now. We have a new president in the White House who has made a very staunch and clear stance about immigrants. I mean, how do you see this community being affected going forward, just trying to recover and survive the aftermath of these fires? We're not even there yet, but how do you see them surviving that under this kind of administration?

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: Definitely. And I'm glad that you bring that question, because one of the things that have been happening, as I talked to them last week, is that many of them are fearful, but they still continue to work and they said that they're gonna continue living their lives as normal as possible. Others, they are saying that this is their way to show that they are not criminals, that they are not murderers, that they are not anything of what current president Donald Trump is calling them, but that they are people that are helping. And they're using this phrase of "el pueblo salva al pueblo" which is people helping people. So that's what they're doing. They said that they don't care, like, who's being affected or what's the color of their skin, what's their income level, they are just trying to help their community to rebuild and revitalize it again. And they said that this is what they are showing, that immigrants are also coming to work

and they are showing their efforts and their passion for the community and they wanted to go back to as normal as possible.

KADIA TUBMAN: Right, just trying to have some sense of normalcy. But even when trying to recover, you have to combat a political message about your community. That says a lot in the strength of that community. So thank you for bringing that. Cerise, from a media coverage standpoint, can you talk to me, talk to us about what the responses have been to the fire, have there been community-driven stories, what are you seeing when it comes to the kinds of coverage we're seeing right now and going forward?

CERISE CASTLE: The coverage that we're seeing right now is largely focused on repopulation, stories like, what to do when you go back to your home. But the issue with a lot of these things is a lot of the advice that's being given is contradictory. You're seeing reports about people being told to go home and open their windows, but at the same time we still have high wind events happening that is blowing this toxic ash right back into the house. What's lacking is media coverage that is one, giving solid advice to people; and two, being realistic about the danger that they're in. What we have seen on the other end of the spectrum, not coming from legacy media outlets but community-driven outlets, places like Nextdoor, social media, and alternative press is efforts of community members coming together to get this information to the people, efforts of DIY air purifiers that are being given out for free by volunteers that are crafting them in their home, spreadsheets of GoFundMes listing families, artists, scientists, teachers, musicians that have lost everything in the fire, and links to their fundraisers to help people get back on their feet. Those efforts by community to rebuild have really outshone anything that the government is doing. And, frankly, I think that these community efforts are going to be what leads the community back into the place that it was. The rebuilding effort will have to happen, as the day laborers are saying, by the people, for the people.

KADIA TUBMAN: Wow, thank you for pointing that out. I do want to refer to a video that you are hosting and producing. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

CERISE CASTLE: Absolutely. This is a video that I'm working on for Capital & Main. And what we did was we went into the Black communities of Altadena and Pasadena to learn about what was lost.

- CERISE CASTLE: In January, the Eaton fire tore through vibrant Black communities in Pasadena and Altadena, leaving behind nothing but rubble. After President Lyndon Johnson signed the Fair Housing Act of 1968, Altadena's Black population grew from 4% in 1960 to 43% in 1980. Onochie Chukwarah moves into his house after immigrating to the area from Nigeria in the 1970s. He was there when the winds that propelled the fire forward began to blow.

- ONOCHIE CHUKWARAH: I was inside the house when the wind was blowing, and it felt like the house was gonna be blown off the foundation.
- CERISE CASTLE: Were you scared?
- ONOCHIE CHUKWARAH: I was. I was scared, but I was calm. There was nothing I could do about it. There's nowhere to hide.
- CERISE CASTLE: His home is still standing, but his shop, Rhythms of the Village, was completely destroyed. He and his son, Emeka sold African goods and operated the space as a community center. Although the shop is gone, the family is determined to keep organizing. Since the fires began, they have turned Onochie's garage into a place where people can come for clothing and basic necessities.
- EMEKA: We are preparing now. We know developers want this land. They have had their eyes on this land for a long time. Gentrification has been happening. So we're fortifying ourselves now with the knowledge and the wisdom, and we're sharing the resources and crowdfunding and pulling together.

CERISE CASTLE: This isn't just tangible, physical things like homes and businesses, but there is a huge loss of community in the Black community and communities of color in this area. The area that the Eaton fire burned was one of the first places that people of color were allowed to actually buy homes in Southern California. So many of these homes that burned had been family homes for three, four generations, dating back to the early 1960s. And it was a very small community, a very tight-knit community that burned. And now that it's gone, there's a lot of worry about gentrification coming in and completely erasing this history and this sense of togetherness in Los Angeles that really we're seeing disappear more and more, places where people of color can own homes and etch out a place where people can come and feel safe.

KADIA TUBMAN: As you both mentioned, it's been hard to get the right information out there. Even on a national level, we haven't seen as much critical information in terms of who's affected and how they're being affected. But even when it comes to safety and how they are currently surviving this crisis, where do you think people are getting their information? Do they even have access to that information? I wanna start with you, Jacqueline.

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: Yes, I wanna mention that that is something very important that should be addressed a little bit more because, definitely, there's not enough information for the community. And I'm gonna talk specifically about that immigrant community, whether they are documented or undocumented, just because there's a barrier of language and also a lack of knowledge. So they don't know the information that is out there. So people didn't even know that their homes didn't have the proper insurance, so they don't know how to access it. And then let's keep in mind that undocumented people are not gonna have access to certain government help, for example, FEMA. So all these things are things that people need to know, but they don't know exactly how to access the resources. I was at the Pasadena Convention Center a few days ago

where there was the Red Cross shelter. So there's tables of FEMA helping people outside, but you can see that tables are empty. Like the help is there, but people do not know how to get to that help. So therefore they don't know how to go and ask the proper question. So I think that's something that should be addressed, and not only addressed in English, but also in different languages because we know that not only the Latinos, but there's also a good amount of Asian population that was affected in this case. So having the resources on the language is very important.

KADIA TUBMAN: Absolutely. 'Cause I was just gonna ask you about the Spanish language media, so thank you for bringing up the language barrier in terms of getting critical information to keep these communities safe. Cerise, how about you? Do people in certain communities that you've covered have access to this kind of information?

CERISE CASTLE: I would say largely no. Most people are completely unaware. When you go to report in Pasadena, Altadena, you can see that many people do not have protective gear on as they're doing this cleaning. Many people are, you know, leaf blowing their streets to get rid of this dirt and debris. They're being encouraged to come back, they are being encouraged to rebuild. California Governor Gavin Newsom recently signed an order that did away with environmental protections that we have in place here in California to rebuild, which really is just going to create another crisis like this all over again.

KADIA TUBMAN: What part do you see yourselves playing as journalists in ensuring that people have the right information or just generally that some certain groups of people or if not the Los Angeles government, city government is being held accountable?

CERISE CASTLE: Yeah, as a journalist, I really see it as my role to get this information out to as many people as possible. I had a conversation with someone today who said to me that he really appreciated me posting on Instagram every morning about fire updates, giving updates about who's missing, how many structures had burned, posting notifications, the limited notifications that we have seen from the city of Los Angeles on my Instagram, posting studies that have been done about toxic chemicals in the air in the wake of 9/11 or in the water after Hurricane Katrina. I really think that just putting that basic information out there, since so much of it has been lacking by legacy media outlets throughout this entire fire event. We can look back on January 6th when the National Weather Service had put out multiple notifications, warning people to be ready to run at the drop of a hat. The Los Angeles Times had not posted anything about these weather events until it was already happening. Instead, all of the coverage on their social media channels were about the Golden Globes. So there's a huge lack of real important coverage locally that we're seeing in Los Angeles. And I hope that this event is a wake-up call to all of my colleagues to remember that that basic local reporting really serves so much importance, whether it comes to climate crisis, local government, or really any event.

KADIA TUBMAN: Absolutely. And, Jacqueline, for you, where do you find yourself in this moment when it comes to holding certain groups accountable or just making sure that people have the information they need?

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: Definitely. I do wanna mention that as soon as this issue came about, for example, the insurances, we have been trying to reach California Commissioner Ricardo Lara, and we haven't been able to. He's the one who talks about the insurances and what is the proper way for people to follow up on that. However, we do wanna focus on undocumented community, and I don't know if it's because there's not enough information on that or because he really doesn't have the time, but we are following, trying to figure out like, "What can they do?" And the only person that can give us that information is the Commissioner of Insurance, Ricardo Lara. So we also recently learned that the California Assembly is trying to come up with some legislation plans in order to help and rebuild in a faster way. However, that is still gonna take a little bit of time because they have to go into voting and they have to approve some processes. So we have to make sure that that change happens quicker at the local level because yes, many families don't have a place to live. But for those who can go back home, it's like, "Is it worth it?" As I was mentioning before, "Is it worth it to have their children back in those communities where the quality of life and the air and everything is getting really bad?" So that's something that should also be addressed more at the local level.

KADIA TUBMAN: I'm curious, for my last question for you both, when it comes to the role of journalism right now in a catastrophe such as this, covering what kinds of information the media should be putting out there, that's the work that you've also been doing in addition to just making sure people get the right information, but what do you see as the key role of journalism right now in such a catastrophe as we find ourselves with the wildfires in Los Angeles? I'm gonna start with you, Jacqueline.

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: We have to tell those stories. We have to show that the houses that were lost, the people that have been impacted, they are not just numbers. It's not just materialistic stuff. Like we're talking about people, and every person has a story. And even the groups, for example, as I was mentioning before, about the day labor workers, we have to go and show these faces and we have to show these places too so that they can see that the help is needed and it's needed fast.

CERISE CASTLE: I completely agree with Jacqueline. It's on us to show the real faces and people that are experiencing these crises. It's so important for journalists to inform people. And whether that is warning them about an oncoming disaster, cautioning them about the dangers that come after an immediate catastrophe, and, again, as Jacqueline said, showing the people that are living in the reality.

KADIA TUBMAN: Thank you both. As both of you have said in this moment right now, journalism is called forth to make sure that people have the information they need, but also making sure that when it comes to catastrophes such as this, that the long-term effects are thought about early enough so we can actually face them. But also the communities that you both are covering and upholding and making sure that people see the people and the faces and the stories, we can't thank you enough for the work that you do. So thank you both, and thank you for joining us on this month's Meet the BIPOC Press.

CERISE CASTLE: Thank you so much.

JACQUELINE GARCÍA: Thank you for the invite.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, thank you, Kadia. If you've enjoyed this Meet the BIPOC Press episode, be sure that you can find all our previous episodes in our archives. They're all right there at our website, along with the information on how you can subscribe to our free podcast. Subscribe to the podcast to get the uncut version of every week's show. 'Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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