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[Frédéric Gimello](#)\*

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*Brief Report*

# From Embers to Rumors: Decoding the Societal Impact of the January 2025 Los Angeles Wildfires on Misinformation

Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb

Avignon University - Department of Humanities - CPSN Institute, 74 rue Louis Pasteur, 84029 - Avignon Cedex 1, France; frederic.gimello@univ-avignon.fr; ORCID : 0000-0003-4376-2462

**Abstract:** The fires that ravaged Los Angeles in 2025 not only caused considerable material damage: they also triggered a parallel crisis of misinformation, fueled by the strong emotional and symbolic charge that fire carries in the collective imagination. Emblematic fires - whether the Great Fire of Rome (64 CE), the Great Fire of London (1666) or Notre-Dame Cathedral in 2019 - have acquired a metaphorical significance in human history that goes beyond their immediate context, highlighting profound social concerns. In Los Angeles, media coverage of the fires of 2025 intensified tensions around inequality, institutional failures and environmental justice, while the emotional dimension of the fire fostered the rapid rise of conspiracy theories. Fake news, such as the elite grabbing of resources, resonated with an American population already marked by distrust of institutions and its elites embodied by the billionaire duo Trump and Musk. What's more, the media's propensity to privilege emotional impact over factual information has only reinforced this phenomenon. To be truly effective, strategies to combat forest fire misinformation must therefore address both the emotional drivers of fire symbolism and the historical patterns that give these narratives their persuasive force. Concerted efforts by scientists (especially historians, sociologists and information and communication specialists), journalists and local players, combined with more factual communication, can help restore confidence and strengthen collective resilience. It seems essential to remember that fire in our civilization represents both an environmental threat and a powerful cultural symbol with deep-rooted roots and imagery, in order to better understand the dual crisis of fire-related ecological disasters and the misinformation that recurrently accompanies them.

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## Introduction

In January 2025, Los Angeles experienced one of the most destructive wildfire seasons in its recent history. A persistent drought, aggravated by climate change and unusually forceful Santa Ana winds, created an explosive situation that endangered both urban neighborhoods and the surrounding natural environment. Although California has long been accustomed to wildfires, the proximity of these particular blazes to the iconic backdrops of Hollywood—and the myths that accompanies it—as well as to affluent areas inhabited by film celebrities, drew heightened attention from national and international media. These outlets documented the interplay between the dramatic visuals of burning hillsides and Los Angeles's intricate social fabric.

Yet the fires were not merely a material catastrophe for the Los Angeles area: they also prompted renewed scrutiny of the role that myths and archetypes can play in shaping—and sometimes distorting—how information is produced, consumed, and interpreted. Media outlets, for instance, emphasized dramatic rescue efforts for high-value celebrity properties, sparking debate over whether public resources had been disproportionately channeled toward wealthy districts. While many of these allegations remained unverified, they spotlighted deeper concerns related to privilege,

institutional credibility, and governmental accountability. Historically, crises have often exposed—if not magnified—underlying social divides. The Titanic’s sinking in 1912, for example, starkly revealed class-based disparities in lifeboat access, with wealthier passengers far likelier to survive than their less affluent counterparts. In Los Angeles, suspicions of resource hoarding and bias quickly transcended the wildfires themselves, evolving into a broader debate on inequality not unlike that following the Titanic disaster.

Amid this climate, the seemingly mundane question—described by Jeanneret (2011) as “who should be rescued first?”—became a symbol of entrenched structural imbalances. Rumors circulated about billionaires owning industrial-scale farms that allegedly monopolized or diverted local water reserves, or about the wealthiest homeowners hiring private firefighting units. Although little direct evidence supported these claims, they resonated with public sentiment long attuned to social injustice and discrimination. Other critics argued that “peripheral” neighborhoods lacking in resources and hydrant access had been left behind once the flames spread. Echoing major historical events—Titanic included—disasters of this magnitude tend to both uncover and exacerbate preexisting hierarchies (Latour, 2008; Whiteside, 2012).

## 1. Media Coverage of the Los Angeles Fires of 2025: Symbolism of Inequality

From the vantage point of Los Angeles’s wealthier enclaves, the 2025 fires illustrate how media coverage can reveal previously downplayed socio-economic disparities and build emotionally charged narratives around essential resource allocation, particularly water. Depictions of celebrities defending their sprawling homes ignited broader discussions about privilege, fairness, and the obligations of the elite, while certain journalists and social media influencers selectively highlighted particular rescue stories. This phenomenon quickly fueled conspiracy theories that questioned the credibility of local governance, relief agencies, and the press itself. In this highly combustible environment—both literally and figuratively—high-profile estates were used to symbolize systemic inequities, including unsubstantiated rumors that water supplies were diverted to protect private residences. Whether these allegations were legitimate or not, they wielded considerable emotional impact, echoing a long tradition in environmental reporting that focuses on cultural anxieties about exploitation and inequality (Closs, 2016). Some media outlets reinforced this perspective by favoring sensational angles—heroic rescue operations and famous personalities—thereby concentrating public scrutiny on prominent elites.

Nevertheless, not all coverage was uniform. While some news outlets zeroed in on star-studded neighborhoods, others shed light on marginalized communities that lacked the resources to rebuild, often due to lower property values, insufficient insurance, or broader economic hardships. This disparity in reporting underscored how selective media attention can obscure the experiences of socioeconomically vulnerable districts. Controversies surrounding alleged water diversion or the hiring of private firefighting squads also highlighted the question of equitable access to critical resources. On platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, conspiracy theories and rumor-laden narratives flourished, fueled by pervasive distrust in local institutions charged with managing fire responses. Allegations of elite monopolization of water—despite limited evidence—found wide resonance, reflecting the existential worries of many residents. Although such stories can oversimplify the complexities of wildfire management, they also illustrate the powerful role of public sentiment in pressuring local authorities to reevaluate their emergency strategies. In the end, whenever a fire impacts a region—particularly one linked to iconic or heritage sites—media coverage invariably intertwines physical devastation with the deeper collective notions of how society imagines destruction by fire (Garcia-Castillo et al., 2023; Paskins, 2020).

## 2. The Role of the Media in Environmental Crises: Postmodern Disenchantment

Media accounts of the Los Angeles wildfires mirror a broader cultural phenomenon: widespread disenchantment with modern institutions. As Jauréguiberry (2018) and Boullier (2018, 2022) observe,

the disconnect between highly touted technological advances—such as sophisticated methods for firefighting—and the harsh realities of environmental disasters naturally fuels a sense of disillusionment. Wildfires thus emerge as potent symbols of this disillusionment, exposing the shortfalls of scientific progress and social frameworks in dealing with ecological crises. Indeed, the scope of this disenchantment extends beyond individual grievances; it reflects a collective unease over modern society's perceived inability to safeguard both its citizens and its environment.

Media coverage heavily influences how communities gauge the competence and efficacy of the institutions meant to protect them in times of environmental upheaval. Whether referencing droughts, fires, or floods—such as the major cyclone in Mayotte in 2024—reports often rely on shocking visuals, for example, the destruction of wealthy neighborhoods, thereby reinforcing the impression that advanced technology cannot wholly avert catastrophe. Repeated suggestions that privileged groups manage or siphon off resources for personal benefit only compound the sense of betrayal. In line with Bourdieu's work on journalism (1994) and television (1998), these stories can be viewed as manifestations of a symbolic struggle within the media realm, where social hierarchies are abruptly affirmed or contested (Marlière, 1998). When coverage frames the fires as a standoff between privileged and underprivileged communities, it solidifies the public's perception that ecological crises are inextricably tied to deeper societal inequalities.

The psychological repercussions of such disasters are intensified by phenomena like eco-anxiety, which Abdullah (2024) characterizes as profound worry triggered by accelerating climate change and human helplessness in the face of environmental decline. Media reports that stress the futility of collective action only magnify this sense of powerlessness (Rouhani et al., 2023), leading some individuals to disengage, believing their efforts will not suffice to counteract large-scale crises.

### **3. Disinformation and Emotional Resonance: The Impact of Fires on the Collective Imagination**

Misinformation and rumor-mongering are not confined to Los Angeles; they reflect humanity's longstanding fascination with fire as a symbol of destruction (with the figure of Prometheus, Trousson, 1978), purification, and sometimes renewal (Pyne, 2001). Beyond its functional uses—cooking, heating, and manufacturing—fire has been historically linked to moments of social upheaval and revolution (Frazer, 1930). Over centuries, it has occupied a unique place in the collective psyche, crystallizing widespread fears and shaping gender- and power-based relationships around who can control or harness fire (Reimer and Eriksen, 2018). Numerous iconic sites and cities have succumbed to flames over time, from the Library of Alexandria in 48 BCE to León Cathedral in 1966 (Venegas et al., 2020). More recent incidents include the 1992 Windsor Castle fire (Garcia-Castillo et al., 2023), the 2018 National Museum of Brazil catastrophe—which destroyed a 19th-century building along with nearly 90% of its cultural collections—and the 2019 blaze at Notre-Dame de Paris, leading to the collapse of its centuries-old spire (Neto & Ferreira, 2020; Geen et al., 2020). Each of these events extended beyond its local scope to embody more general social anxieties. Rome's Great Fire of 64 CE, for example, sparked political rumors accusing Emperor Nero, while the Notre-Dame inferno drew global solidarity, underscoring the extraordinary emotional significance of fire. Notre-Dame offers a stark illustration of how the sight of flames consuming a monument dear to a religious community can stir potent fears related to loss and identity, prompting—and explaining—international responses that acknowledge the universal importance attributed to such heritage (Geen et al., 2020). The ensuing wave of emotion closely parallels the public's typical reaction to major fire-related catastrophes.

Within this landscape, misinformation functions as an emotional accelerant. Sam Wineburg (quoted in Henry, 2025) notes that fabricated narratives often exploit widespread indignation and fear, which intensify in emergency situations. Much like the stories that have given Emperor Nero a reputation for tyranny, suggestions that elites intensified the Los Angeles crisis tap into deeply ingrained cultural archetypes of betrayal and corruption, making it easy to cast certain individuals as villains rather than victims.

The media's role in documenting—or deflating—such claims is key. According to Boykoff and Boykoff (2004), environmental crises in particular are frequently approached from angles that maximize emotional impact instead of factual precision. During the January 2025 fires in Los Angeles, social media platforms operating under algorithms designed to reward sensational content magnified this tendency. AI-generated images—one even showed the Hollywood sign engulfed in flames—circulated widely before eventually being debunked, monopolizing the media discourse and overshadowing rational discussions of fire management or climate policy. The enduring myth of Nero performing on his lyre while Rome burned shows just how persuasive a gripping narrative can be, regardless of historical truth (Closs, 2016).

Countering misinformation associated with fires demands acknowledging both the emotional underpinnings of such stories and the historical echoes that amplify their reach. Henry (2025) cites initiatives such as CaliforniaFireFacts.com, which seek to provide credible public data, but as Kristina Lerman argues, social media architectures generally favor “engagement” over dependability (Lerman, cited in Henry, 2025). Consequently, eye-catching posts, images, or stories—regardless of accuracy—are more likely to go viral. Research conducted during analogous incidents, such as the 2019 Notre-Dame fire, indicates that transparent communication from officials and balanced media reporting can encourage shared community values rather than divisive interpretations (Elwert et al., 2023).

## Conclusion

The 2025 Los Angeles wildfires cast a bright spotlight on the hazy interface between ecological disasters and misinformation, underscoring deeply rooted anxieties about social inequality and environmental vulnerability. Fire symbolizes both a direct danger and a cultural focal point, and each time it blazes, it starkly exposes underlying inequities. Yet fire has also historically served as a cornerstone of human progress. For instance, the Great Fire of London in 1666, which consumed over 13,000 homes, prompted wide-ranging discussion on urban planning and social disparities. In North America, the Great Chicago Fire of 1871—claiming more than 300 lives and displacing over 100,000 people—spurred significant reforms in public safety and construction standards. Other historic conflagrations, such as the Boston Fire (1872) and the Smyrna Fire (1922), emerged from explosive political or ethnic tensions but ultimately led to notable structural transformations.

Today, fires continue to resonate strongly in public consciousness. Shortly after the 2019 Notre-Dame incident, a massive explosion in Beirut's port on August 4, 2020—set off by the ignition of over 2,750 tons of flammable materials—killed at least 220 people and injured more than 6,500, devastating large parts of the city. As with Los Angeles, public debate swiftly focused on resource management and institutional trust. Gaining a fuller understanding of climate disruptions—and fires specifically—both in their physical and symbolic aspects is vital to unravel the misinformation that so often accompanies them. Examining historical precedents—many of which propelled sweeping urban planning reforms by revealing systemic weaknesses—can help us anticipate the powerful emotional undercurrents and rumor-driven narratives that frequently accompany such tragedies.

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