



What the Maui Wildfires Teach Us About Using TikTok in Disaster Response

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TikTok has over 170 million monthly active users in the United States, including large numbers of young adults and Spanish-speaking users. 52% of its users report they regularly get news from the platform, making it a critical space for reaching the public with timely, potentially life-saving information. For many users, TikTok is not just an entertainment platform – it is a primary source of information. During high-stakes events like disasters, social media platforms play a vital role in real time crisis communication—not only for disseminating warnings and emergency alerts, but also for crowdsourcing on-the-ground information and educating the public about safety and recovery. The 2023 Maui wildfires serve as a strong case study for this developing trend.

During the 2023 Maui wildfires, TikTok emerged as a frontline platform for crisis communication. Residents, tourists, and community members used the app to share real-time updates, personal stories, and calls for help. These user-generated posts were not only emotionally resonant but visually powerful, capturing public attention. But the same features that make TikTok so captivating also lay a foundation for misinformation to spread. This dual reality highlights both the platform’s potential as a compelling public communication tool during emergencies and the urgent need to address its vulnerabilities in disseminating false or misleading content.

TikTok as an Emerging News Source

TikTok’s success lies in its algorithmic promotion of emotionally engaging content, short video format, and ease of user interaction. Its design makes it more accessible than many traditional news sources, especially for users with limited literacy, disabilities, or non-dominant language backgrounds—including Spanish-speaking users, who make up a large portion of its U.S. audience. This broad reach presents a unique opportunity for public agencies to connect with audiences who may be missed by traditional communication methods. For example, Spanish-speaking users—who make up a large share of TikTok’s U.S. user base—can access timely updates in their preferred language without the need for translated press releases or subscription paywalls. The platform’s visual, user-generated content makes it easier to understand complex situations in real time, including for users with limited literacy, limited English proficiency, or disabilities.

TikTok’s rise as a news source has transformed how younger and underrepresented audiences engage with current events. According to Pew Research, 39% of U.S. adults under 30 now regularly get news from TikTok—a sharp increase from just 9% in 2020. Many of these users do not rely on traditional news outlets, meaning TikTok is introducing civic and crisis-related content to audiences who might otherwise remain uninformed. In this way, TikTok is not just amplifying news; it is creating new pathways for public engagement, including among young voters.

An analysis of 275 TikTok posts across all phases of the wildfires—crisis, immediate aftermath, and long-term recovery—provide insight into the social media platform’s use during and after a disaster. Posts shared during the active phase of the Maui wildfires received an average of 75,092 likes and 10,928 shares—evidence of how heavily the public relied on the platform for information and support.

This study found that emotionally resonant content—such as personal stories, visuals of damage, or tributes—garnered far more engagement than official guidance. This highlights a core strength of TikTok: its ability to rapidly disseminate emotionally compelling, community-driven content at scale. Government agencies have yet to fully adapt to their communication strategies for social media. To effectively reach users on platforms like TikTok, public messaging must not only be accurate—it must also be emotionally and visually engaging.

The Threat of Misinformation

While TikTok is powerful for information sharing, the same features that drive its engagement—short-form videos, algorithmic curation, and emotional storytelling—also enable the rapid spread of misinformation. In this study, posts promoting false or conspiratorial claims outperformed all other categories in likes and shares, highlighting a troubling reality: virality often favors emotional resonance over factual accuracy.

While misinformation spreads on other social media platforms, TikTok’s structure—visual content, duets, and algorithmic amplification—makes it especially vulnerable to manipulation. In turn, misinformation has been linked to lower trust in information sources from traditional news media, government agencies, and public health systems. This erosion of trust can have real-world consequences, from reduced compliance with evacuation orders to diminished uptake of public health services. Misinformation not only misguides the public but can shape policy attitudes, mobilize opposition to evidence-based decisions, and delay recovery efforts.

Policy Recommendations

It is critical to recognize how social media platforms like TikTok are reshaping information dissemination and becoming increasingly central to the news ecosystem. This persistent development requires a reevaluation of how public information is disseminated. To achieve this, investments in digital communication strategies and content regulation can be pursued through a variety of channels:

1. Fund Social Media Monitoring Teams

- Provide resources for emergency management agencies to monitor and respond to misinformation in real time. FEMA’s Rumor Control initiative during disasters and the CDC’s Center for Forecasting and Outbreak Analytics show that public agencies can monitor and counter misinformation. Similar tools adapted to fast-paced platforms like TikTok could help local emergency managers respond to misleading content in real time.
- Additionally, emergency management policies should encourage public-private partnerships with platforms like TikTok to flag and suppress misinformation during federally declared disasters. This could include rapid response protocols and prioritized amplification of credible, verified sources.

- Develop partnerships with universities and community groups to build capacity for fact-checking and content analysis. One successful model, FactCheck.org, exemplifies how academic institutions, in partnership with community groups and government agencies, can play a sustained role in identifying and correcting misinformation.

2. Train Trusted Messengers in TikTok Engagement

- Equip community leaders, influencers, and public information officers with toolkits that help translate key messages into TikTok-friendly formats. These toolkits should provide ready-made templates, message testing protocols, and visual storytelling strategies to ensure timely, accurate, and emotionally resonant content reaches audiences on the platforms they use most during a crisis.
- Use emotionally engaging formats, such as personal stories, before-and-after imagery, and survivor testimonials, to communicate facts and build trust. Public agencies can draw on resources like SAMHSA's digital storytelling guide to craft emotionally resonant, trust-building content. These tools provide practical guidance for using personal narratives and visuals to enhance the reach and impact of disaster communication.

3. Time Messaging to Match Public Attention

- Push critical safety content during the initial crisis and immediately following the crisis. This is when public engagement peaks and attention is highest. Agencies should pair urgent updates with emotionally resonant visuals and trending hashtags to boost visibility and ensure life-saving information reaches broad audiences.
- Plan sequenced campaigns to maintain visibility into the recovery phase, including mental health support and financial relief information. NYC Emergency Management's "Notify NYC" and "Know Your Zone" campaigns showcase how scheduled updates can keep recovery resources visible.

4. Integrate Social Media into Emergency Planning

- Require public agencies to include platform-specific strategies in their disaster preparedness plans. Los Angeles County's Emergency Operations Plan includes detailed social media protocols, assigning responsibility for platform-specific updates during disasters.
- Include TikTok and similar apps in training modules for emergency responders and public information officers. The National Disaster Preparedness Training Center provides training on platform-specific social media communication to improve real-time outreach and counter misinformation during disasters.

Conclusion

TikTok is no longer just an entertainment outlet. It is a digital public square where people go during crises to get—and give—information. To improve disaster response, we must invest in using and regulating these platforms strategically. Failing to recognize the potential of TikTok as a channel for information both misses an opportunity for policymakers to reach wide audiences with timely news and guidance, and further risks the spread of inaccurate information.

Policy leaders must ensure public agencies are not only present on these platforms but actively equipped to use them strategically—integrating TikTok into disaster response just as they would traditional media or alert

systems. Failing to do so means missing a major opportunity to reach younger, multilingual, and digitally native audiences when they are most in need of reliable guidance.

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