

# Media failed to highlight the negative impact of single-use facemasks on the environment, says review

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A cloth facemask. Credit: Wikimedia, CC BY 2.0

A multidisciplinary team from Bangor has shown how media messaging could have determined people's mask-wearing choices during the

pandemic. This was based on a qualitative and quantitative review of British and Irish press coverage mentioning masks and face coverings between March 2020 and December 2021.

The results, now published in the journal [\*Frontiers in Communication\*](#), demonstrate how newspaper journalism favored single-use surgical [masks](#) but overwhelmingly failed to report on their environmental impact and lack of waste management. The paper discusses how the [environmental impact](#) of single-use masks or face coverings is an under-considered effect associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's not just what's reported that has an effect, but the way in which it is reported," explained first author, Dr. Anaïs Augé.

"What we found was that the word 'masks' was used predominantly to mean disposable face masks, while the media used 'face-coverings' to refer to homemade or shop-bought material masks. They also predominantly used the word 'mask' while discussing mandatory wearing of face coverings, and the term 'face-covering' where there was an element of option.

"This was despite the U.K. government predominantly using masks to refer to masks used by [health professionals](#) and face-coverings as a term used for what everyone else should be wearing to reduce the spread of COVID-19."

Materials scientist Dr. Morwenna Spear added, "Despite scientific discussion of the safety provided by reusable [face-coverings](#), and the waste associated with single-use masks already in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, little of this was presented in newspapers."

Prof. Thora Tenbrink concluded, "The increase in waste can be related to prevailing representations of single-use surgical masks and limited

attention paid to environmental concerns.

We think our work casts further doubt on the role of newspapers in effectively conveying the information needed to enable the public to make informed choices."

The research grew out of the Arts and Humanities Research Council project "Between [environmental concerns](#) and compliance: How does media messaging affect motivation and choice between disposable versus reusable facemasks?" led by Prof. Nathan Abrams.

It was awarded to explore the complex factors underpinning consumer choice of masks and the adoption or rejection of facemask wearing, including the responsible disposal of masks.

**More information:** Anaïs Augé et al, British and Irish newspapers implicitly support single-use masks over reusable face coverings, *Frontiers in Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2023.1256349](https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1256349)

Provided by Bangor University

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