



Written by [Paul Dragu](#) on December 4, 2020

USA Today “Fact-Checker” Makes False Claims About TNA Article on Cloth Masks

On Wednesday, a *USA Today* “fact-checker” attempted to “[fact-check](#)” an [article](#) published by *The New American*.

The “fact-checker,” tasked with providing clarity and truth to the public, misunderstood a key premise of the *TNA* article, accused the *TNA* writer of writing something she didn’t, ignored the study the *TNA* article was based on, and falsely claimed the author cited a study that she didn’t.

On October 29, *TNA* published the article, “[CDC Admits: No Conclusive Evidence Cloth Masks Work Against COVID](#),” by Raven Clabough. The article cites as its first and main source a [CDC report](#) from October which says cloth masks are “inferior” to medical masks and respirators, and, at best, “cloth masks *may* provide some protection if designed and used correctly.” Hence Clabough’s premise of “no conclusive evidence.”



Photo: FG Trade/E+/Getty Images

However, the *USA Today* headline reads, “[Fact check: Article falsely claims studies signal CDC admission that masks don’t work](#).” Miriam Fauzia, who authored the *USA Today* article, wrote that the *TNA* article “claims the CDC has presented evidence that rejects the efficacy of masks.”

TNA makes no such claim. Clabough wrote that there is no conclusive evidence. And she never claimed the CDC rejects the use of cloth masks. In fact, she wrote the exact opposite: “Yet the CDC continues to recommend cloth masks for public use, even as the organization has flip-flopped on whether the virus is airborne.”

There is a difference between saying there’s no conclusive evidence, and making an absolute claim. Clabough simply said the CDC admits evidence suggests cloth masks aren’t as effective as medical masks. The report she cites makes clear that cloth masks should not be used if medical masks are available: “More research on cloth masks is needed to inform their use as an alternative to surgical masks/respirators in the event of shortage or high-demand situations,” the CDC reports, as well as, “At best, cloth masks ‘may’ work in a community setting.” The word “may” is used a lot.

“So in areas of high transmission, mask use as source control *may* prevent spread of infection from persons with asymptomatic, presymptomatic, or mild infections,” the CDC report says.



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“ ... universal face mask use *may* be beneficial.”

The only conclusion the CDC report reaches is that medical professionals—people who work with the sick— should not wear cloth masks: “To our knowledge, only 1 randomized controlled trial has been conducted to examine the efficacy of cloth masks in healthcare settings, and the results do not favor use of cloth masks.”

The scientific understanding of the efficacy of masks is anything but settled. Both publications make points worthy of debate. Taking an absolutist approach to masks is ill advised, though it’s tempting to do so, especially with those who strongly advocate mass public health campaigns. Such campaigns seek to impose a “one-size fits all” solution to problems of subtle and complex character comprised of nearly infinite variables. So it is with mask absolutism.

Yes, Clabough’s *TNA* story casts doubt on the efficacy of cloth masks. And she does say there is evidence to suggest cloth masks may be ineffective and may even increase the spread of the virus (she cites a different source for that). But she lets the studies do all the talking.

Which begs the question: Why didn’t the fact-checker address the October study that inspired and provided the main point of the *TNA* article she was trying to discredit? There is a hyperlink to the study four words into the article. Fauzia mentions other studies *TNA* cited. She cites additional ones to reinforce her point. She even cites a report about infections linked to air conditioning in a Chinese restaurant. Yet not a single mention of the main report in the *TNA* article.

In addition, she falsely accuses *TNA* of citing a report it didn’t.

Under the subhead “Influenza and COVID-19 similar but not the same,” Fauzia of *USA Today* writes, “A third report brought up by Clabough, [published in Emerging Infectious Diseases](#) in February, evaluated the effectiveness of personal protective measures on influenza virus transmission.”

Clabough brings up no such report. *USA Today*’s article provides a hyperlink that sends the reader to a report Clabough never mentioned. Furthermore, Fauzia says in her article the report she wrongly attributed to Clabough is from February. It’s actually from May.

Clabough of *TNA* did bring up a report that assesses the effectiveness of personal protective measures on influenza virus transmission. But it wasn’t the one Fauzia said it was.

While it may seem like splitting hairs, if ever there was a time in which a fine-toothed comb is warranted, this would be it. As the CDC admits, the use of cloth masks is “under debate.”

That’s a mild way to put it.

People have physically fought over masks; officials around the country have been inundated with emails, letters, phone calls, and even threats regarding masks. And so-called fact-checkers have tirelessly worked to discredit anyone who dares to acknowledge there is plenty of evidence to suggest it’s a topic worthy of debate.

So studies matter. Details matter. Down to the particle that may or may not be getting through the mask.

Our Ruling: *USA Today*’s fact-check is false.

The bulk of *USA Today*’s article attempts to argue in favor of mask wearing by critiquing the results of the various scientific studies cited by *TNA*. Those studies stand on their own, as does the factual reporting of *TNA*. *The New American*’s role is to present those studies, often largely or completely



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ignored by other publications, so the public can make informed decisions.

That certain masks worn properly under certain conditions reduce exposure is non-controversial. But, extrapolating from this to conclude that the simplest possible mask will work at all times for all people under all circumstances is absurd. Yet this is what is demanded.

Moreover, findings continue to show that masks are less effective than generally hoped or desired. For the latest such findings, see the very large randomized controlled trial (RCT) on the subject from Denmark [here](#).

This writer recently visited his local Montana hospital. Before entering the hospital, the employee at the door asked that the cloth mask be replaced with a blue, hospital-issued surgical mask. The point couldn't be any clearer. Medical professionals don't trust cloth masks.

Dennis Behreandt contributed to this report.



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