

Reckless journalism created a Blue Whale panic when we should be talking about mental illness

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Abstract

Media hype has gotten parents, teachers and even the government more interested in a fake epidemic than a real one.

Earlier this month, a 27-year-old from Ranchi allegedly committed suicide after [writing a letter](#) to the Prime Minister alleging police torture. Earlier this week, in Hyderabad, a 28-year-old woman killed herself by [consuming pesticide](#) after being harassed by her husband and in-laws. A day later, a 30-year-old mother of two from Mysore [hanged herself](#), again due to domestic abuse. None of these cases have become national news.

What has caught the nation's attention is the Blue Whale Challenge.

Have Indians — children and teenagers in particular — been committing suicide and attempting to commit suicide recently? Yes, in droves.

According to a study published in The Lancet in 2013, suicide is the leading cause of death among those aged 10-24 in India, with [62,960 such deaths reported in 2013](#).

Have these suicides been linked to a underground cultish game called the “Blue Whale Challenge” whose supposed Russian creators — multiple people have claimed credit — are currently awaiting trial? Yes.

However, these links are merely the creation of a sensationalist media. There is in fact, no credible evidence that proves that such a game exists.

There is no credible evidence that proves that the Blue Whale Challenge actually exists.

It's easy enough to go online and find various neatly formatted, standardised list of the supposed tasks involved in the challenge that always starts off with the carving of “F57” on your forearm and eventually concludes with suicide as the 50th task. And searching for the hashtags [#i_am_whale](#) and [#f57](#) and [#f58](#) does turn up messages related to the challenge on a number of social networks.

But how does Rajiv Makhni, writing in the [Hindustan Times](#), know that the responses to these hashtags aren't coming from trolls or [bots \(as has been](#)

found to be the case in Russia), or that they aren't just instances of catfishing? (Hint: He doesn't.)

How does Ekta Handa of [India Today](#) know that they are establishing private chats with Indian kids and leading them to commit suicide? (Hint: She doesn't.)

Have reporters found evidence of any of these supposed tasks having been administered in any of the suicide cases reported in India? (Hint: They haven't, nor have the police.)

Yet, writers like Rajiv Makhni and Ekta Handa have dangerously declared that this is not a hoax, rather than merely presenting the known facts.

A common thread that underpins most of the Blue Whale-related press reports is that they rely on unnamed sources (when they mention sources at all). Only a [handful of reports](#) have engaged in actual journalism and sought sources and evidence for the claims being bandied about.

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An alarming trend has emerged in recent times, with every suicide or suicide attempt reported as a Blue Whale Challenge, [despite there being no evidence in most of these cases](#). A thorough investigation by Scroll.in [found little credibility or actual evidence beyond hearsay](#) in any of the cases reported in India.

There are entire websites on the Internet dedicated to videos of people getting killed (in traffic accidents, police shootings, suicides, etc.). Teens have even started [live-streaming their suicides](#) as a way to memorialize themselves, to gain attention and sympathy, or to “get back” at bullies. And just as in the offline world, online bullying and suicide encouragement — [sometimes by strangers on pro-suicide forums](#), and sometimes by [people they know](#), have led to actual deaths.

However, such deaths aren't exactly new and there are no cult-like qualities to them: thus the media doesn't spend weeks talking about vulnerable teens and children being driven to suicide by bullying or due to pressure from parents or teachers — it is simply too common.

On the other hand, they are happy to make the most of this narrative of a cult-like game that takes “ordinary” (as though mental health issues are an aberration) children and converts them into mindless zombies that commit suicide. As a result the Internet and ‘games’ are demonized and the real issues remain ignored.

This state of affairs is best illustrated by the case of M.K. Sawant, a 22-year-old from Kerala who killed himself in May. Three months later, his mother [told](#) police that she suspected it was due to the Blue Whale Challenge — after hearing of another suicide with an alleged link to the game. Lost among all the talk of fictitious whales was Sawant's history of mental illness — he had been receiving treatment for depression for four years and had already attempted suicide twice.

Clearly, it seems even parents find it necessary to externalise depression and mental health issues in order to deal with the tragedy of a son's suicide. As

[Amulya Gopalakrishnan writes](#) in the Times of India, “Our protective posture towards young people, our sense of their suggestibility, guilt about not having given them enough attention, our discomfort with their growing autonomy, all combine to let us readily believe such ‘trends among the youth’ stories.”

Not only has the media’s sensationalist reporting led to the Blue Whale Challenge being blamed for unrelated suicides, it has also resulted in the Werther Effect — copycat instances of self-harm. A boy in West Midnapore, who was depressed, said he started playing the Blue Whale Challenge via an app called “Timi-rer Dak” (“Whale’s Call” in Bengali), and said he’d received phone calls. He had even carved “F57” into his arm using a knife (a photo carried in newspapers). But upon interrogation by the police, his story ran into contradictions: no traces of phone calls were found, and he was found to [have faked the story for attention](#).

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And it’s not just ordinary citizens who have been drawn into this web of half-truths and whole lies spun by the media. The Department of Electronics and IT is asking Internet companies “[to ensure that any such link of this deadly game in it’s own name or similar game is immediately removed](#)”. A PIL has been filed in the Delhi High Court seeking a ban on the Blue Whale game and lawyers are arguing that [searches for “blue whale” should also be banned](#).

India accounted for the highest estimated number of suicides in the world in 2012, according to a WHO report published in 2014. And almost 7.5% of India’s population suffers from some form of mental illness according to a 2017 WHO report. But instead of discussing mental health issues, the effects of bullying and ragging, the pressures applied by teachers and parents, and educating parents and teachers on improving trust with their children and students, the media has initiated a misinformation campaign that has created a nationwide panic and led to a focus on the wrong targets.

If the mass media sensationally blame a bogeyman for the suicides, people are apt to go after the bogeyman rather than the real causes. As Gopalakrishnan writes, “The whole point about a moral panic is not whether the story is true or false [...] Usually, a small or stray ‘actual’ incident is made into a gripping narrative, one that stokes genuine social anxieties.”

Media reporting about the Blue Whale Challenge has broken multiple [ethical principles of the press](#), including those on accuracy and fact-checking, and specifically the injunction not to “pass on or elevate conjecture, speculation or comment as a statement of fact”. The Press Council of India needs to step in and come up with [guidelines](#) on reporting of self-harm by the press. The Editors Guild of India and the Foundation for Media Professionals, and the Press Clubs in various cities could hold workshops on ensuring accuracy in reporting on self-harm. We deserve better than the sensationalist and harmful reporting that our media is peddling at the moment.

Note: If you live in India and have (or know someone who has) suicidal thoughts and ideation, please reach out to [Aasra](#): +91 22 27546669 (Mumbai-

based) or [Sumaitri](#): +91 11 23389090 (Delhi-based) or [Sneha](#) +91 44 24640050 (Chennai-based).