It is a couple of months since the first media reports appeared on ‘blue whale’, the vicious online game that, it was being said, tempted teenagers into undertaking harmful tasks that included a final task that involves acts of self-harm, in the form of suicide. The hysteria that followed the news has died out somewhat. What remains now is only the mythical element surrounding it.

The police investigated the reported cases, but did not seem to have found enough evidence to connect any of the reported mishaps to the game per se. Being unable to find any ‘link’ to the game despite scouting around cyber space for weeks together, they
It is not unusual for sections of the media to perpetuate myths and sustain hysteria around them. We have had such examples in the reportage on ‘Ramar petrol’, ‘acid rain’, ‘the ISRO espionage case’ and so on. Readers’ appetite for entertainment value along with the information content in news stories create a climate for sensational reportage. And this that makes breaking-news hysterical.

The blue whale story, which was initially taken up by international media outlets months earlier, had already been dismissed in some corners as an urban legend. Then it hit various parts of India as breaking news. Mental health professionals, cyber security experts and the police joined in an effort to maintain vigil and take precautions. Still, an atmosphere of panic emerged and taking reasonable precautions with due fact-checking did not seem to be the collective social response.

Much panic and alarm were created among parents and the general public by the cautionary appeals – many of which inadvertently gave unwarranted publicity to the mythical game.

The initial reports were about the game being downloaded thousands of times and teenager activity like going to the seashore, or making cut-marks in their body as influenced by the game. These proved to be fabricated. But we have had breaking news of parents linking actual suicides to it, instances of children injuring themselves as if they were doing tasks of the game, youth claiming on social media that they were undertaking such tasks, and so on. The questions about these later events need a more detailed explanation; what is called ‘werther effect’, or copy-cat suicide behaviour, can do that.

Suicidal behaviour in a cluster, influenced by a highly publicised case of suicide and following much the same pattern, is said to be the outcome of the ‘werther effect’. The name is drawn from the central character of the 18th century novel by German writer Goethe, The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774). Modelled on an episode in it, a cluster of copy-cat suicides followed its publication.

Scientific validation of this phenomenon in recent years has led to media guidelines being issued on suicide reportage in many western countries to avoid such foolhardy copy-cat behaviour. This includes recommendations such as avoiding prominent display and not publicising the methods used for suicide and so on. In many countries, the guidelines are strictly followed.
Guidelines ignored

In India, similar guidelines have been created by the association of psychiatrists, the Indian Psychiatric Society. However, if the blue whale reportage is any indication, most media outlets have not adhered to the guidelines.

The cautionary rhetoric about the ‘deadly game’ had had its overkill, and it ended up advertising the methods of the game to the public, kindling the werther effect, which again generated more news and further feeding the mythicalisation.

Teenagers who enacted the wave need their actual issues explored; more often than not, it is an underlying mental health issue. As for the media, we need to develop the right media-literacy to discern news with a scientific temper and avoid being led by news illusions. Media outlets need to adhere to guidelines of reportage on suicides and suicidal behaviour.

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