# It Lurks in the Deep: Memetic Terror and the Blue Whale Challenge in India Anirban K. Baishya

## The Networked Uncanny

In September 2017 a 30-year-old Indian man, Ashok Maluna, jumped into a river, killing himself. Prior to his suicide, Maluna had uploaded a video on Facebook, declaring that he was a victim of the Blue Whale Challenge (BWC). While certainly not the only death reported surrounding the BWC, Maluna’s instance was unique because of the use of a confessional video on Facebook.[[1]](#footnote-1) The BWC is believed to have originated in Russia in 2016, consisting of a series of tasks culminating in suicide; but the exact nature (and indeed, the veracity) of the game remain shrouded in mystery despite reports of arrests of suspected administrators.[[2]](#footnote-2) Given this sub-public, almost urban legend status, Maluna’s video is a crystallized media object in which the traces of the BWC can be detected. But the video also raises a number of questions about the nature of public speculation around the BWC. For instance, Maluna states in his video that he had ‘downloaded’ the Blue Whale game on his phone—something that is impossible since the BWC is not a downloadable app. There is no way of ascertaining whether Maluna had misrepresented (accidentally or deliberately) his experience of the game, or even if the BWC was a proxy for other issues plaguing him. What matters however, is the mere mention of the BWC in the video. This invocation of the BWC is indicative of a media ecology in which phenomena manifest themselves as real through circulation. A close analogy is the idea of ‘fake news,’ whose truth value is questionable, but whose status as a circulating media artifact is very real. In this networked ecology the process of transmission and imitation lying at the very heart of the concept of the meme assumes a central role. Crucially, the BWC is not intended to be a meme. In contrast to satirical political memes, or humorous cat memes, which have definite objects and audiences, the BWC becomes memetic in the process of its spread.

In our current digital environment, memes are most commonly associated with their visual and textual manifestations—image macros and rage-face templates for example. In these cases, repetition and imitation can be seen on the visual surface itself. But is the visual the only level at which memes and memetic activity can be understood? What about feeling, affect and other nonvisual aspects of the human sensorium? Perhaps we should approach the meme as more than just a visual and textual form. What allowed the BWC—something that lies at the intersections of conspiracy theory, hoax and pure fear—to spread itself through networked audiences was not simply text and image, but memetic terror. Memetic terror is the necropolitical surplus of networked life. It is a feeling of threat that manifests itself through the affordances that make networked life possible, but it is not a breakdown of the network. Rather, it constitutes a surplus precisely because while it operates through the same infrastructures that make networked life possible, it is in excess of both individual and institutional control. We cannot always regulate who or what we are connected to—Wendy Chun describes this as the ‘anxiety over the jacked-in computer’s breaching of the home.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Memetic terror is an affective, networked fear of such breaching. It replicates itself through exposure to repeated information, reverberating throughout digital infrastructures, as it interacts with personal devices, policy, and regulation, as well as users’ bodies.

The BWC is not the only site in which we can locate this kind of memetic terror; consider internet panics like the Momo Challenge and the cyb-urban legend of the Slenderman. Both of these examples are now known to be either hoaxes or works of fiction, yet they feltreal at an affective level during the peak of their circulation. Part internet folklore, part rumor and part internet prank, such instances suggest that networked media link bodies and devices together in an affective machine. Perhaps it would be worth it, then, to ask what it was that Ashok Maluna felt as he spoke about the BWC in his final video message, and what resonated with him as he interfaced with the network? While we cannot conclusively answer this at the level of the individual, we can begin to map what had spread through the digital ecology leading up to this situation. Such mapping and analysis of the impact of the BWC in India’s digital ecology requires us to attend to the infrastructural—i.e., that which lies between the social and the network. Thus, while the BWC may not have originated in India, it becomes a part of India’s evolving internet-vernaculars and is coextensive with its cultures of WhatsApp forwards, misinformation and of course, memes.

Networked infrastructures are key to this arrangement as they enable the transmission of affect through text, image and hypertext. I take seriously Parks and Starosielki’s assertion that while media infrastructures may be owned by states and corporations, ‘at their edges they are imagined, arranged, and adopted in different ways by people or "end-users".’[[4]](#footnote-4) As they remind us, our encounters with infrastructures ‘can elicit different dispositions, rhythms, structures of feeling, moods, and sensations.’[[5]](#footnote-5) We can, then, conceive of not just infrastructural effects, but also infrastructural *affects* that are in excess of what an end user can control. Things like the BWC emerge at the edges of internet infrastructures—from the friction between vernacular internet practice and the unknowable expanse of the network. The memetic, in the case of the BWC then, can be said to be the region of the infrastructural irrational. If device interfaces and screens are the façade of the digital home, then memetic terror is that which crawls in the shadow cast by its woodwork and piping. Always in excess of what is intended of the infrastructure, and graspable only as shadow, memetic terror is more than just the visual and textual representation of what it spreads. Thus, while there may be visual manifestations of the BWC (Maluna’s video is an example), the ripple-effect of the BWC emerges out of the affective power of the network itself.

## Of Monkeys and Whales: Infrastructures of Feeling

It is true, the BWC does not originatein the specific cultural milieu of India. Yet something about it resonated with the Indian imaginary. Echoing Charles Taylor’s conceptualization, I postulate that memetic terror is in fact, an imaginary—something ‘carried in images, stories and legends’ through repetition and replication.[[6]](#footnote-6) Understanding why something not inherently Indian resonates with India’s internet users requires some reflection on the specific forms of its networked modernity. Writing about postcolonial India’s urban spaces, Ravi Sundaram asserts that ‘media experiences increasingly expose and generate new sites of fear.’[[7]](#footnote-7) According to him, such fear is made possible by technologies of relay, both digital and non-digital—text messages, mobile phone photos, media headlines and good old rumor.[[8]](#footnote-8) Focusing on such practices, Sundaram demonstrates how, in the city of Delhi in 2001, rumors of ‘the monkeyman’—a monster that allegedly mauled people in their sleep—not only spread widely, but also presented a paradox in which the phenomenon was seen as ‘part mass hysteria’ and partly a ‘verifiable source of fear.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Sundaram’s analysis turns our attention to the changing dynamics of India’s urban spaces that began to inhabit the ‘time of the global’ through media urbanism in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[[10]](#footnote-10)

While the case of the monkeyman is not memetic in the same way as the BWC, it does help us understand how new media technologies, while couched in the language of rationality, can still generate spaces that are unknowable and uncountable. In some ways, the internet is an extension of such an uncanny despite the façade of algorithmic objectivity. As Wendy Chun and Sara Friedland assert, our dependence on networked devices constantly tethers us to ‘infrastructures of tracing and remembering […] Even when our machines are not networked, they leak.’[[11]](#footnote-11) While such networked media enable connection to others, by and large we never know what we are interacting with beyond the interface of our devices. The digital uncanny envisages a space in which ‘new mobile populations, new networks, new previously unimagined terrors’[[12]](#footnote-12) threaten the positivist veneer of the always predictable, seamlessly managed and frictionless network. The very thing that connects us also terrorizes us. Memetic terror, as in case of the BWC, is an expression of this dissonant digital habitat.

In the context of India’s internet infrastructure, this has clear implications. According to the IAMAI *Digital in India* report of 2019, India has 504 million active Internet users ‘who are 5 years & above […] 433 Mn are 12+ years old & 71 Mn are 5-11 years old.’[[13]](#footnote-13) The report further states that the mobile phone ‘remains the device of choice for accessing internet in both urban and rural [sic].’[[14]](#footnote-14) The prominence of the mobile phone in such statistical figures is significant as it means that a majority of Indian internet users access the network through mobile, locative devices that are always connected. While the report is quick to declare that the digital divide in India (between rural and urban) no longer exists, such statements do not give us a sense of how users interact with their devices and with what level of understanding of network processes. As India’s culture of WhatsApp forwards and misinformation demonstrates, the numerical magnitude of what is now being called ‘digital India’ does not necessarily preclude the possibility of the infrastructural uncanny. The spread of the BWC in India must be read in this infrastructural context. To the planned city: a monkeyman; to the algorithmic network: a whale.

## When a Meme Becomes Real

As the BWC panic began to spread in India, institutional responses to the crisis also emerged. As mentioned earlier, the BWC was not made to be a meme—not in the same way as image-based memes (like cat memes) at least. Yet, there has been a flurry of media activity around the BWC in India which lends to its memetic propagation. In this media ecology, news and media reports, as well as user generated content become memetic carriers. For instance, at the peak of the panic, *The Times of India* produced a web video titled ‘What is the Blue Whale Challenge?’ Aided by motion graphics, and occasionally overlaid with melodious music, a reassuring female voiceover explains that the BWC is ‘shared among secret groups or a link on social media’[[15]](#footnote-15) and provides other details about the kinds of alleged tasks that lead up to the final suicide. In some ways, the video is intended as a public service announcement, albeit one that is to be viewed and shared on the internet. Strikingly, there is no rumination about the veracity of the BWC; its existence and the nature of operation is presumed to be factual, although what we encounter in the video is not much different from internet rumors about the BWC. Videos and headlines like these abound, so this one is not unique by any stretch. But it is worth noting that in replicating the rumor-like details about the BWC, even a news video like this one becomes an unintentional memetic by-product that lends itself to the affective charge of the BWC. While this does not constitute misinformation in the same way that fake news does, it demonstrates how the circulation of traditional media such as news can also become memetic in the digital ecology. To put it another way, (fake) news is not always memetic, but may be impacted by memetic circulation. A video like this may not mean much individually, but taken as part of a larger set of media objects, they become memetic in that they ‘pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Following Shifman’s postulation of the meme as a ‘shared social phenomenon,’ we might then ask, how was the BWC shared in the context of India?

In August 2017, a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed in the Delhi High Court with the explicit purpose of asking platforms such as Google, Facebook and Yahoo to remove links to the BWC.[[17]](#footnote-17) The petition stated that ‘there is a game / challenge namely “blue whale” Game / Challenge through GOOGLE, FACEBOOK and YAHOO.’[[18]](#footnote-18) A similar petition was also filed in the Bombay High Court (Mumbai) by an NGO named Citizen Circle for Social Welfare and Education. The PIL stated that the online availability of the game should be blocked in the interest of the welfare of children who have easy access to mobile handsets and application downloads. A third petition filed at the Supreme Court sought more concrete, infrastructural measures, asking the Court to direct the Indian government to:

improve the filtering services at Indian Shores like having firewalls in each Cable landing Station (CLS) or having DNS Blocking wall with brain scanner (at underground submarine optical fibre cable connecting the operators abroad) to be installed at Indian Shores to prevent and filtering the virtual online games which are harmful and life threatening and morally degraded.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Several such petitions exist, and as one study notes, this may well have been the ‘first time in Indian legal history that five High Courts of India [...] were approached simultaneously for regulating the internet.’[[20]](#footnote-20) Most, if not all of these petitions frame the BWC within: (a) the language of child welfare and safety in a networked environment; and (b) an imagined media ecology that encompasses internet applications, the dark web and even popular culture. For instance, the Delhi petition makes a reference to the suicide-themed television show *13 Reasons Why*, while the PIL in Mumbai compared the BWC to *Pokémon Go*. Further, all three petitions also refer to news reports of suspected deaths, as well as internet rumors about the structure of the BWC. At one level, such petitions respond to media reports and rumors rather than a tangible, verifiable phenomenon. News reports and public litigations thus replicate the ideaof the BWC in a memetic chain.

The ripple effects of this chain can be felt in not just PILs such as these, but also gestures towards concrete action. For instance, in the city of Chennai, the police department issued an advisory to parents of teenagers.[[21]](#footnote-21) At the legal level, the Supreme Court sought the Indian government’s response to pleas for banning the game.[[22]](#footnote-22) The government responded, saying that it was impossible to do so, since the BWC is not a downloadable game.[[23]](#footnote-23) Nevertheless, in December 2017, the Indian Ministry of Information filed an advisory on its website with guidelines for monitoring child mental health, safe internet practice and so on.[[24]](#footnote-24) An FAQ linked on the website states that it was unclear how platforms such as Google, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Microsoft would curb access to the BWC, because it is ‘not publicly available and freely downloadable. It is a social media phenomenon where conversations about this take place secretively in closed social media groups.’[[25]](#footnote-25) In this exchange, the shadow world of the internet game becomes real as echo. Rumors feed headlines, which in turn feed regulatory efforts. To take a page from Ryan Milner’s work, this is literally a ‘world made meme’ through the ‘messy memetic interrelationships’ between media, law, regulation and of course, users.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Diagram

Description automatically generated

**Fig. 1:** Excerpt of an information brochure about the BWC hosted on the Information Security Awareness website run by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.[[27]](#footnote-27) (Original Creator: Information Security Awareness, Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Govt of India).

## End/Users

It might be worth taking a moment to think back to Parks and Starosielki’s notion of the ‘end user’ in relation to the BWC. As opposed to the rational, choice-making agent denoted by the terminology of the end user, the affected public presumed by regulatory efforts such as those mentioned above are largely seen as infantile, irrational and susceptible to (memetic) influence. In that sense, the infrastructural uncanny of the BWC is not unlike those found in the dystopian techno-imaginaries of horror films such as Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* (1998), Takashi Miike’s *One Missed Call* (2003) and more recently, Leo Gabriadze’s 2014 film *Unfriended*. In each case, fear and terror emerge from the uncontrollable underbelly of seemingly rational technologies—the near-obsolete VHS tape in *Ringu*, the emergent culture of the mobile phone in *One Missed Call* and the Skype interface in *Unfriended*. One study also compares the BWC to the cyberpunk body horror of the cult anime classic *Serial Experiments Lain* (1998) in which suicide in the physical world is seen as a gateway to the virtual.[[28]](#footnote-28) Narratively then, the BWC is part of this broad genre of techno-horror that focuses on not only the intended end users of these technologies, but an uncontrollable technological surplus that literally ends the lives of these users. While such texts are surely fictional, they inform the folklore of internet terrors such as the BWC, the Momo Challenge and Slenderman. The lines between fact and fiction, between verifiable risks and the hoax are blurred in these cases. Albert Benschop’s rephrasing of the Thomas Theorem is immensely illustrative here—‘If people define networks as real, they are real in their consequences’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Perhaps a slight rephrasing is in order: ‘if people define memes as real, they are real in their consequences.’ The fact/fiction binary is less important in understanding the nature of the BWC in India than the extremely ‘real’ consequences of its reverberation.

Approaching the BWC as this kind of a collective hyper/text also allows us to attend to its affective resonances through the network. Accounts that consider such phenomena as folkloric may in fact have some generative insights. In her study of the BWC Elizabeth Tucker reads the phenomenon as a form of hypermodern ostension, a legend enactment that makes extensive use of digital technology.’[[30]](#footnote-30) Tucker reads the BWC as a ‘faster-moving version of the kind of imitative behavior’ seen in pre-digital social arrangements such as the famed ‘Werther Effect,’ a spate of suicides that resonated with Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* in eighteenth century Germany.[[31]](#footnote-31) While the social and cultural contexts are vastly different, the crucial point is imitative behavior—imitation and replication are after all at the core of the memetic. If the transmission of affect is a question of contagion emerging from ‘encounters between texts and readers’[[32]](#footnote-32) then the collective hypertext of the networked folkloric resides at the level of infrastructure as a dynamic and resonant space.

If legal and regulatory efforts are at one end of the memetic spectrum of the BWC, the other is the level of the textual. As Tucker demonstrates, this kind of folkloric ostension manifests itself in user generated videos, online conversation and commentary, pranks and so on. Interestingly, a major focus of Tucker’s analysis is on Indian internet users, especially in the case of prank videos for which, as she notes, India is the leading place of origin.[[33]](#footnote-33) Following this, it might be generative to turn to some concrete objects that demonstrate the BWC’s more vernacular, ‘folkloric’ memetic ripples. A quick YouTube search for ‘Blue Whale Challenge India’ leads us to a mix of news videos as well as user generated content. Considering such user generated content allows us to observe some repetitive similarities.

One category of content includes advisory videos that again, using the same set of internet rumors, alerts viewers about the dangers of the BWC. The other category includes amateur short films that use the narrative format to the same effect. What is interesting is the way the BWC manifests itself in the visual coding of these films. For instance, in one video uploaded by user Mohak Meet,[[34]](#footnote-34) we see a teenager ‘download’ the Blue Whale game from the Android Appstore. Soon after we also see shots of the WhatsApp interface as the teenager interacts with the ‘admin.’ The WhatsApp interface surfaces in another similar narrative video uploaded by user onionNgarlic.[[35]](#footnote-35) The premise again, is same—a school-child with a cellphone stumbling upon the BWC, ‘downloading’ it and then being sucked into the vortex of the game. Strikingly, in this latter video, one of the tasks assigned to the protagonist is to watch the horror film *The Ring* almost in an intertextual metanarrative about digital contagion. Mobile communication platforms such as WhatsApp become central to such articulations of unregulatable encounters on the network, and of the fear and anxiety arising out of such encounters. As Shakuntala Banaji and Ram Bhat point out, WhatsApp use in India has an intimate connection to death in the context of vigilante violence.[[36]](#footnote-36)On the one hand, while WhatsApp becomes a key agent in everyday practices of connectedness, it also overlaps with misinformation, rumor mongering and the fear of sudden, erupting violence.

Graphical user interface, text, application, chat or text message

Description automatically generated

**Fig. 2:** The WhatsApp interface and *The Ring* featured in an amateur short film on the BWC on YouTube. (Creator: onionNgarlic, YouTube).[[37]](#footnote-37)

Let’s also not forget how the cellphone and such mobile communication platforms inform the petitions and regulatory efforts mentioned earlier, especially in the context of children and the internet. Further, in all of these—advisory videos, short films, news reports, petitions— the figure of the vulnerable child and the idea of a nefarious shadow network are a common refrain. In the absence of a concrete referent, the family and the child become signs on which the fear of the unregulatable network is fixed. Again, think back to the language of petitions and advisories, the melodrama of the short films on YouTube, or commentary and chatter on sites like YouTube and Twitter. While law and regulation scramble to catch up to the viral speed of the network, the collision between bodies, devices and practices remains largely unmanageable. And as Bauman reminds us, ‘we fear what we can’t manage.’[[38]](#footnote-38)

A picture containing text, electronics, display, computer

Description automatically generated

**Fig. 3:** YouTube screengrabs of an *NDTV* news program about the BWC. The image on the right shows public demonstrations against the BWC (NDTV, YouTube).[[39]](#footnote-39)

## **The Fearsome Meme**

That the networked uncanny manifests itself in text and images circulating and reverberating with users/audiences is not surprising in itself. After all, in the study of film, such semantic and syntactic turns are the very basis of the notion of genre.[[40]](#footnote-40) In that sense, the BWC may very well be taxonomically placed within the internet folklore genre of techno-horror. Yet there is something about the memetic reverberation of the BWC that extends beyond the imitation and replication of genre codes. This is seen in the visual and textual traces that reappear with remarkable consistency at different levels of responses to the BWC. The legalese of petitions and regulations, the language of advisories, the melodrama of news and user generated content, all echo with similar visual and textual codes. For instance, many user generated advisory videos on YouTube detail the alleged fifty stages of the BWC with their attendant tasks in voiceover and text—as for instance asking the user to carve ‘f57’ on their arm or watching horror films at 4:20 am. The same coding is also visible in the short film variants, albeit in narrative form, and such details also inform the PILs discussed earlier.

Graphical user interface, text, application

Description automatically generated

**Fig. 4:** The BWC ‘tasks’ listed in an advisory video on YouTube. (Creator: SidTalk, YouTube).[[41]](#footnote-41)

While such details remain largely unverifiable or dubious, they become ‘real’ through repeated circulation. Details about the BWC take on the structure of rumor, which Veena Das describes as being marked by a ‘lack of signature, the impossibility of its being tethered to an individual agent.’[[42]](#footnote-42) The dystopian and sinister imaginary of the BWC circulates with terrifying affective force through the interconnected ecologies of the news, participatory internet culture and the law, but the ‘images, stories and legends’[[43]](#footnote-43) that make this possible yield to no one referent. For sure, user generated content, news headlines and legal documents are not memes in and of themselves. But the murmur of these objects transmits the terror of the digital unknown from device to device and body to body in a memetic loop. If the map precedes the territory,[[44]](#footnote-44) the meme now shadows the network. This is the work of the meme as a mode (‘the memetic’) rather than an object (‘this’ meme). So, what after all, did Ashok Maluna feel as he blamed the BWC for his death in his pre-suicide video? Perhaps the whisper of the network.

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