

# CRISIS ▶ RESPONSE

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PROTECTION | PREVENTION | PREPAREDNESS | RESPONSE | RESILIENCE | RECOVERY



## MANIPULATION

**FAKE NEWS, FAKE PRODUCTS: WHO & WHAT TO TRUST?**

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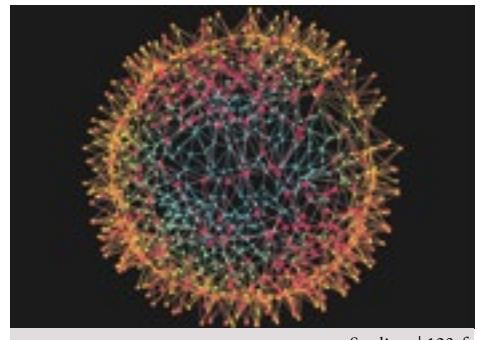
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With physical objects, the ability to detect fakes is supported by trademarks or testing marks. When it comes to propaganda, there is no such source of truth, says David Stewart

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Blueananas | 123rf

**I**n this issue, you will find news reports of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) *Global Risks Report 2018* and the *2018 Allianz Risk Barometer*, which survey

experts and businesses on what risks concern them most. Both reports note the usual suspects – extreme weather events, natural disasters, cyber attacks, data fraud and terrorism among others.

Landscapes inevitably change over time. Risk topography is no different, with new concerns such as illicit trade, large-scale involuntary migration, new technologies, food crises and disease finding their way into these reports.

Old foes and new... But regular readers of CRJ will already be familiar with these threats.

Very rarely do we get frustrated on CRJ, but a perennial (if, thankfully, relatively rare) irritation is meeting somebody who simply cannot conceptualise why events and factors outside their immediate area of expertise have a direct and material relevance to their work in resilience, preparedness, response or security.

Events inevitably demonstrate how deluded this myopic attitude can be.

Years ago, when researching for the launch of this publication, I got in touch with a number of contacts in this sphere to research the effects climate change might have on their roles. Every single person replied that they envisaged no impact at all. How times have changed.

Opioid addiction; trauma and mental health (whether in the workplace or between generations of societies enduring poverty or conflict); the malevolence of online predators encouraging vulnerable youngsters to self-harm or to hurt others; fakery, fraud, propaganda and misleading news; the shifting acceptable window of political views and how these are being shaped by manipulation – these are all topics in this issue. And they are often entangled with one another; it can be a matter of making connections between seemingly disparate phenomena or events, and extrapolating potential consequences and impacts to get a truly global vision of what could lie over the horizon.

Understanding these linkages and their possible consequences on your business, community or service is imperative. Failure to do so not only implies a lack of vision and planning, but also demonstrates a deep failure to understand and appreciate the intricate, dark kaleidoscope of today's ever-evolving threats and risks.

**Emily Hough**



# The Blue Whale challenge

Sites encouraging vulnerable youngsters to self harm or commit suicide are a sinister threat to both individuals and wider society, says **Patrick McIlwee**, who investigates some of the myths and realities of such websites, as well as possible solutions

**M**ention 'Blue Whale' and most of us would naturally think of the largest mammal in the world, a beautiful endangered creature that inspires awe and wonder – truly one of the ocean's most inspiring beauties. Sadly, this aquatic marvel has an occasional tendency to beach itself and, defying all attempts to refloat it, gasps its last breath in what could be considered to be a form of suicide.

Drawing rather dubious inspiration from this, the 'Blue Whale Challenge' has made unwelcome headlines around the world. This involves vulnerable teenagers being drawn into a series of challenges by a so-called sponsor. The challenge lasts 50 days and consists of succession of dares to self-harm and post photos on social media or send them directly to the sponsor. The self-harming increases in severity and culminates in the ultimate self-harm or suicide by the vulnerable teen, although 'victim' may be a more appropriate description.

During the 50 days, the tasks themselves reflect a psychological dependence on the sponsor and create a controlling relationship. One feature is apparently that contact with the sponsor or media posts must be made at strange hours, thus creating sleep deprivation. The watching of horror movies is encouraged, especially the gory ones of the so-called 'slasher' genre. Thus the desensitisation process begins; small cuts and self-mutilation graduate into more severe damage and eventually the ultimate expression of despair.

Possibly the most shocking photograph the media have obtained of this abusive phenomenon is of a teenage girl's arm with the words 'blue whale' carved into it. This was supposedly done over the mid period of the sponsorship.

It is alleged that there are apps that can be downloaded onto a smartphone, along with Twitter and Instagram pages to promote and possibly link the potential victim with a suitable 'sponsor' (too grand a title for any such sick individual but, however inappropriately, we shall maintain the terminology for the sake of clarity and continuity). They also provide a forum to post the results of the abuse and whatever parting testimony the actual or potential suicide wishes to leave their loved ones or posterity in general.

But where did this alleged phenomenon emanate and how widespread is it?

Blue Whale appears to have come to prominence in early 2016 when a Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported on a group called F57 on a social

network that was encouraging vulnerable teenagers to self-harm and commit suicide. Notably, even at this early stage, there were many allegations, but few actual proven links between the real incidents of harm and the group activities. In 2016 Philip Budeikin, a former psychology student, was arrested in Russia and claimed that he actually invented the game in 2013. Further claims of wanting to cleanse society of people of 'no value' seemed to give great illumination on his character and motivation, but were later suspected media sensationalism. At first, Budeikin claimed innocence, but then changed his story. In any case he



entered a guilty plea and in May 2016 was convicted on two counts of inciting suicide.

In a similar case not long afterwards (June 2017), a Russian postman was accused of setting up another group and it was claimed he encouraged more than 30 children to join his group and follow his commands. The first thing to notice at this point is the copycat element, which we shall return to in a little while. The next point is the geographical location – Russia – the so-called 'suicide capital' of the world. With so many cases and attempts, there would naturally be a proliferation of people looking at such self-harm/suicide groups on social media and the Internet. But surely this must be a global, rather than purely a Russian phenomenon?

In South America police forces are investigating cases in Argentina and Brazil, Chile and Uruguay. A 14-year-old Argentinian boy recovering in intensive care claimed that he was part of such a group; at least eight Brazilian states and six in Uruguay are actively pursuing allegations of links that widespread cases are linked to one or more indigenous sites or groups.

Both China and India have experienced reports of such groups and cases are still being reported

Teohchin Leong | 123rf

# - fact or myth?

in India. Since a ten-year-old child in Ningbo of Zhejiang province in China became involved, the Chinese authorities have begun to monitor such sites. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have also reported cases. We shall return later to a very interesting point, namely that no official confirmation has been admitted that links any suicide to this 'game' in India.

With its size and Internet connectivity, the USA is not immune. Incidents in Texas, Georgia and Oklahoma all are believed to show a linkage and the police in Oklahoma appear to have accepted the theory and are, presumably, pursuing it as a line of investigation.

Neither is Europe itself exempt. Serbia, Turkey and Poland have all apparently recorded cases of self-harm apparently linked to Blue Whale. The activity in Bulgaria prompted an investigation in February 2017, although there were strong indications that the claims that organised groups were encouraging self-harm and suicide were, in reality, a hoax.

In the UK there is particular concern, especially surrounding younger teenage girls. A study among head teachers has recently revealed that self-harm among children has risen in almost half of schools over the last two years. And this figure increases when depression alone is considered; over 60 per cent of schools report a rise over a similar time period.

Especially  
worrying

is that 55 per cent of such reports are from primary schools. The *London Evening Standard* reported the highest level of calls concerning suicide to Childline – a free 24-hour counselling service for children and young people – based on a review and analysis of the figures from the 2016/2017 period.

Out of more than 10,000 calls on this subject, more than 2,000 sessions were with callers who had actively thought of or had considered carrying matters through to the tragic conclusion. This was indicated by actively considering or researching a plan, had given away treasured personal items to friends or family in preparation, or had written a farewell note. It is in such fertile waters that the Blue Whale group and its sponsors are said to swim.

A 2017 study published in the *British Medical Journal – Incidence, clinical management, and mortality risk following self-harm among children and adolescents: cohort study in primary care* – draws some alarming conclusions. Incidents of self-harm are rising, but are still considered to fall short of the true picture, as the figures are purportedly under-represented, with perhaps only one in four incidents being presented to healthcare services.

I make no apologies for labouring this point concerning the rise of self-harm, as the same report concluded that this is the single greatest risk indicator of suicide. It also reveals exactly how insidious is the approach taken by the 'sponsors' of Blue Whale.

**"During the 50 days, the tasks themselves reflect a psychological dependence on the sponsor and create a controlling relationship"**

First, they encourage the self-harm aspect. As over half of adolescent suicides have a history of self-harm, this also helps the sponsor to identify the most vulnerable potential victims, and so the relationship begins before the abuse escalates.

Are we dealing with a general trend in society, perhaps generated or exacerbated by the pressures of modern day living, or is there a unified group or network of groups working actively to promote this trend? Even more importantly we must ask what is being done to combat it?

This article does not have the space, time nor psychological expertise to consider such a general trend in society and, as such, shall confine itself to considering how to oppose the group or groups seeking to exploit or encourage these damaging patterns of behaviour.

However, the first question must be whether there is anything to oppose? Is there really such a group in existence? Or are we looking at a case of copycats trying to latch on to a myth? If the latter, then reporting claims of Blue Whale cases could be damaging and become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Essex police officers in the UK have spoken to at least one school and, in March 2017, it was reported that the Devon & Cornwall Police issued a warning about such sites. The same newspaper report also claimed the game was linked to hundreds of deaths worldwide. Did this merely serve to publicise and promote this as fact?

This brings us to the reaction in Italy which, at first, was sceptical. One Italian newspaper went so far as to label the entire idea of such a challenge as a bad joke. An Italian Internet site, BUTAC, is renowned for debunking urban myths and reported that a total lack of evidence to verify the game's existence.

Then a television report in May 2017 investigated the challenge. The report itself was highly inaccurate and drew heavily on unrelated material, such as adult suicide videos with no linkage to the challenge, and an Italian suicide in Livorno. Almost immediately coverage of the challenge increased rapidly and this was taken as evidence that it was indeed real. In parallel to this was a massive rise in the number of searches online for 'blue whale' and related terms. The danger of this phenomenon (real or otherwise) being given publicity and thus feeding upon itself were amply illustrated.

In the final analysis, it seems that what is happening may reflect the growing prominence of reported suicides worldwide (either more incidents owing to pressures of modern day living, or merely better reporting of the incidences themselves). This seems more likely than any concerted attempt to increase suicide numbers either globally or locally. Yet to ignore the possible existence of such groups, even if they are in fact copycats and do nothing is also unacceptable.

In India, Google, Facebook and Yahoo links to any such sites have been removed and we have already mentioned the monitoring occurring in China. Indeed, the Chinese authorities have closed many network groups related to the game and blocked search results for 'blue whale' and related keywords. In October 2017, the Bangladeshi Government instructed its telecommunications regulatory body to investigate the phenomenon and set up reporting mechanisms for social media users to report any suspicious sites.

Thus, there is direct action taken on the Internet and social media itself. Legal remedies are also being put in place by many countries, which are either adapting current

legislation to reflect today's modern society, or introducing new regulations and offences to make a prosecution easier. The Russian Duma has introduced laws making it a criminal offence to induce minors to suicide or to create any form of pro-suicide group on social media.

This is strong and positive action. But the downside may be the creation of the publicity upon which such groups feed to grow. However, there does seem to be an effective and safer alternative in the form of promoting positive, healthy values and attitudes in place of the negativity and despair that these sites are offering.

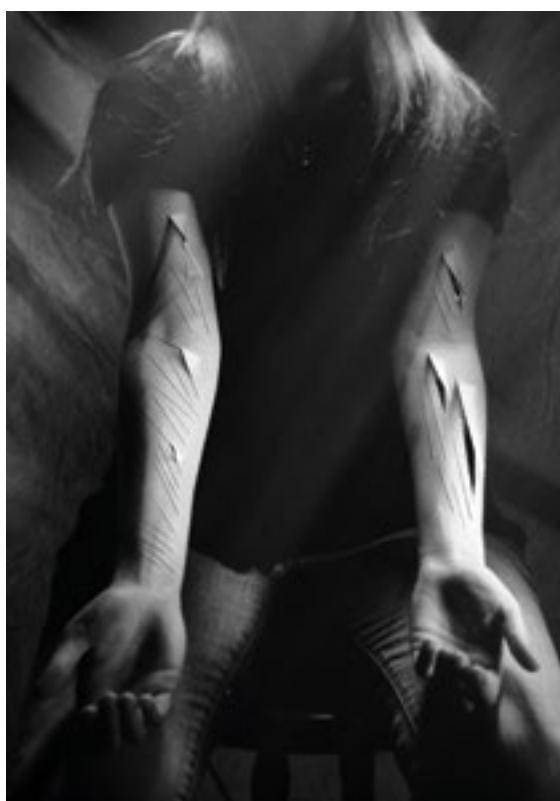
In South America, many sites based on the 50-day challenge have been created, but require positive, pro-life, anti-depression actions, such as trying a new sport or activity, making a new friend, doing a good deed for a stranger etc. Baleia Rosa (Pink Whale) and Capivara Amarela (Yellow Capybara) are two such examples.

The United States was much more direct and simply usurped known Blue Whale sites, keeping the same title, but replacing the negatives with their own positive challenges. Thus, the despairing seeker encounters something much more likely to help than destroy.

In the UK, Childline has excellent advice and information for callers and online users. It manages to address and oppose all that Blue Whale represents directly without (and this is important) mentioning any of these negative sites and challenges by name.

So, it seems there is a rational, effective and positive approach available to all internet regulatory authorities and, indeed, the media as a whole. While leaving the overall healthcare aspect of suicide and self-harm to the global medical profession, these negative sites must be starved of publicity and replaced wherever possible with one of the many positive alternatives. This phenomenon sprang to prominence quickly but with sensible action could be relegated to obscurity just as rapidly.

CRJ



## Author

 PATRICK MCILWEE is a Senior Fellow of the Business Continuity Institute (BCI), a Fellow of the Institute of Civil Protection & Emergency and has over 20 years experience in the field of business continuity and disaster management. He has been involved in the operational responses to over 4,500 incidents within the UK and overseas. He has worked across the private and public sectors, ranging from government, military and emergency services, to multi-national, and small to medium size private sector organisations

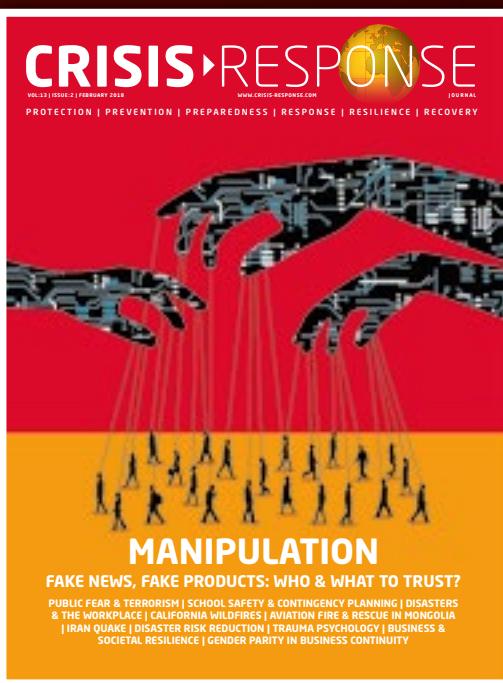
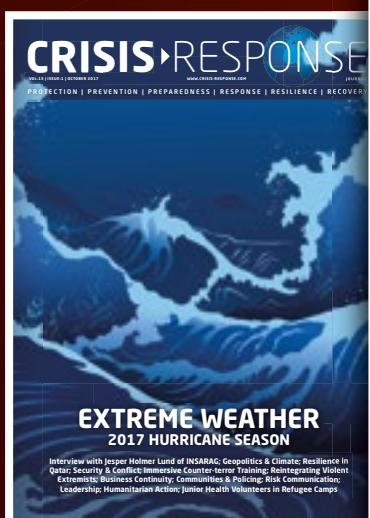
A study among head teachers in the UK has revealed that self-harm among children has risen in over half of schools over the last two years

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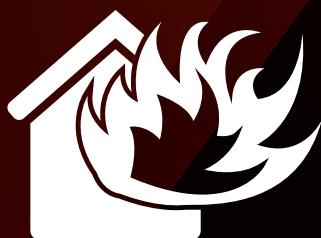
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