

# **(S4, E9) Look, We're Talking About The Titan Submersible. Sorry.**

**Ok I'll level with you - I had a whole episode in the can for this week, but then the Titanic submersible thing happened and now all I can think about is the fucking submersible. I'm revealing too much about myself at work by opening conversations with "Hello, have you heard about the lost submersible?" Of course, everyone has been paying attention to it in one way or another because it's impossible to avoid. But I accidentally traumatised my co-worker by explaining how ocean pressure worked. So that's kind of where I'm at.**

**That is to say, I need to write something about how this has played out so that I don't continue to expose my colleagues to my capacity for macabre thought loops when they are simply trying to get through the day.**

**I'm Alex - this is Pop Culture Boner, the podcast edition, and today I'm thinking about the OceanGate submersible.**

**So, I'll say up top: This is a pop culture podcast, so I'm not about to sit down and become an armchair expert in the specifics of ocean submersible engineering and safety. But I think any time that something like this totally dominates a news cycle at the expense of all other things, it becomes inherently relevant to a lot of what we try to cover**

**on this podcast. With the sheer amount of information being forced into our eyeballs at all times, the things that we pick up and run with are those that capture our collective imagination in some way. And I'm interested in why that is.**

**I think there's a few factors at play here - our enduring fascination with the Titanic, the catastrophic impact of the Silicon Valley attitude of 'move fast and break things', the seemingly Hollywood-inspired hope that they would still be alive, the warp-speed timeline of the news-to-joke-to-moralising cycle on social media, the instantaneous appearance of a conspiracy mindset, and, of course, the James Cameron of it all. This is taking up space in my brain, as I'm sure it is in yours, so I thought we could do a walk-through together to try and understand our feelings and potentially sooth our horror in some way.**

**So my theory on why this became such runaway story, has to do with the cognitive dissonance that starts to build up when you receive too much information about something all at the same time. I see it a lot in online discourse - everything happens so much and then suddenly no one can string together a coherent thought. I think the easiest way to illustrate this is to walk through the timeline of the events of the last week. On**

**Sunday 18th June, OceanGate – a private company providing crewed submersibles for tourism, exploration and research – launched its 22-ft submersible, Titan, to begin a descent to view the wreckage of the Titanic, almost 4 kilometres beneath the surface of the North Atlantic Ocean. An hour and 45 minutes into their descent, the Polar Prince, the Canadian expedition ship from which they had deployed, reported they had lost contact with the submersible.**

**A rescue effort was launched from Boston, with input from the US and Canadian navies, as well as several commercial firms in the vicinity. On the 19th June, the 24-hour news cycle latched onto the coverage and it was reported that at the time of its launch the craft held an emergency four-day supply of oxygen and was estimated to have between 70 and 96 hours remaining. The 5 passengers aboard the submersible included British billionaire, Hamish Harding, Pakistani millionaire Shahzada Dawood and his son Suleman, French maritime expert Paul-Henri Nargeolet, and OceanGate founder, Stockton Rush. The passengers had paid a whopping \$250,000 for a seat on the submersible.**

**On finding out that out that the people aboard had paid an exorbitant amount of money to get in a tin can with limited oxygen, that was sealed from the outside to shoot themselves directly to the bottom of the ocean, the digital commentariat responded by launching into the joke cycle that often comes with these things. There were gleeful mentions of the pod of orcas sinking yachts of the coast of Gibraltar, the ghosts of the Titanic and video game controllers being used to**

**pilot. And of course there was push back on the jokes. Now, jokes about death and dying are fairly common in my family, for reasons that are probably obvious once you start to tally up the number of near misses in the bloodline. I've broken both of my arms twice, both my ankles (one of them twice) and had my shoulder sewn back together and I'm not even high on the list of biggest familial disaster zones. We're not daredevils, we just lack spatial awareness and adapt poorly to our environments. We also, as a family, have been known to quietly cheer when nature gets her own back. Tourist standing too close to a bison in Yellowstone National Park gets tossed like a rag doll? Shouldn't have stood so close to the bison. Eaten by bear while Timothy Treadwell-ing it up in Alaska? That's god's favourite killing machine and you don't need to hang out with it. Gored by a bull at the running of the bulls in Spain? Good. Well-deserved. The point is, I'm not a good gauge of what's appropriate when it comes to joking about death. I also inherently believe most people's inability to comprehend our insignificance in the face of natural phenomena leads us to untimely but ultimately predictable ends. So, take everything I say here with a grain of salt, I suppose.**

**While I didn't make jokes – mostly because I'm not very funny on Twitter – I completely get the impulse. Sometimes the hubris of man adds a little something, ya know? More people have been on the moon than have been to the deepest parts of the ocean – the audacity to think that your money can keep you from nature is laughable. However, I think when there is an incident like this, there's usually**

a point where you reach a critical mass of event information and the online discourse starts to devour itself like a snake eating its own tail.

This started on late on Tuesday 20th June. Throughout the day, banging sounds were picked up by a Canadian aircraft, which potentially indicated that the crew were alive and trapped. On the same day, the New York Times published a piece revealing that the maritime community had expressed deep concerns about the safety of the OceanGate submersibles and the company had been sued by a former employee for wrongful termination after he encouraged further safety testing. Old footage of an interview with CBS News began making the rounds on Twitter, showing the size of the inside of the sub, the wireless Logitech controller steering it, and the fact that the paperwork passengers had to sign was essentially waiving their right to complain if they died or were otherwise traumatised. The journalist behind that piece came forward and said that the sub had technical problems on the same day they were aboard, and briefly lost contact with the ship. Best not to ask any follow up questions about why that wasn't a red flag that journalist raised high.

At the same time that this was happening, the step-son of Hamish Harding posted photos of himself on social media at a Blink 182 concert saying that his family would want him to enjoy the show in these trying times. He also quote-tweeted a photo from an OnlyFans model implying that he would like to sleep with her. By Wednesday 21st June, rapper Cardi B had taken him to task on Twitter, and he deleted his tweets. It was also revealed

over the course of this spat that he had been charged with armed robbery and online stalking of a woman in the EDM scene. Also on the 21st, the New York Times published another piece confirming that OceanGate CEO Stockton Rush's wife was a descendent of Isidor and Ida Straus, two passengers who died aboard the Titanic in 1912. Which also makes her related to musician King Princess.

Of course, none of this really has anything to do with the sub, but it gives you a bit of an understanding of how quickly we reached an information tipping point. As all this was happening, several American cable news outlets started showing perpetual oxygen countdown clocks running over their coverage and the online discourse had reached a sort of meta state. With each new piece of information, the shaky foundation holding any discussion of the subject started to collapse. As quotes emerged from Stockton Rush, repeatedly iterating that those raising safety concerns were standing in the way of innovation and people learned more how the pressure of the deep sea can liquify a human body like it's a blender, the more people began to feel uncomfortable with the number of jokes being made. But when you have that happening alongside the antisocial stepson of a billionaire trying to grift his way into meeting Tom DeLonge, or the pop star descendent of a 1912 Titanic victim posing Tik Toks about the ghosts of their ancestors claiming the submersible, it's hard to keep focus. It's simply too much information.

People evolved from making jokes or scolding people for making jokes, to insinuating that doing so was either

morally righteous or morally bankrupt. Not only that, but there also became this desperate need to show that making jokes was actually a proof point of your impeccable leftist politics. People pointed out that a migrant boat carrying 750 refugees, including around 100 children and teenagers, sank off the coast of Greece on the 14th June, just days before the Titan submersible launched. 104 people survived, 84 bodies were recovered at the scene, and there is increasing evidence suggesting the Greek coastguard may have had a hand in capsizing the boat. At the very least, they did little to help. They've previously been known to arrest volunteer captains who escort ships across to provide assistance in the case of such tragedies. Why, came the cries of commentariat, would we weep for billionaires on a tin can when the world can't even pay attention to the nearly 600 refugees lost to the waves? Not a bad point, but a sentiment I would be less suspect of if it weren't coming in the context of winning brownie points in an internet argument about what exactly was meant by the phrase 'Eat the rich'.

Then came the people trying to explain why people would make jokes – a discourse on the discourse. Joshua Doss, who goes by appliedscience11 on Tik Tok, is a good example. He asks people to follow the thought – if millions of working-class people have no empathy for 5 rich people dying at the bottom of the ocean, what might have happened? He suggests that people are unable to access the things they need to live and, more importantly, that they're not stupid. They know their wages have stayed low because the people that own these companies want to keep ramping up their profits. The

people on the Titan submersible become emblematic of that. Again, not a totally unconvincing argument that Joshua is making. Out of interest I looked up the number of people who had visited the Challenger Deep, the deepest point of the Mariana Trench. Almost every one of the fuckers was a former CEO, or a real estate investor. Most of them had been to space. One of them was Hamish Harding. I did feel my blood pressure shoot up just a little bit reading it. But I do think its giving quite a lot of grace to something that really amounts to rubbernecking at rubberneckers.

Then, on Thursday 22nd June, about 6 hours after the air supply was estimated to run out, the US Coast Guard announced that a debris field had been located near the wreck of the Titanic, consistent with a catastrophic loss of pressure in the vessel that resulted in an implosion and the instantaneous deaths of all 5 people aboard the Titan. As part of the statement from the US Coast Guard, it was revealed that a sound consistent with an implosion had been picked up on Sunday, which added to the growing list of questions and criticisms. Like, why was there a rescue operation, reportedly worth \$6.5 million, if they already suspected the sub had imploded? Why was the sub allowed to operate at all if there were so many known issues with its design? What was the banging if not people? And what happens next?

At the moment, there aren't a lot of satisfying answers. According to the Wall Street Journal, the search continued partially because they couldn't be completely sure that the sound was an implosion, and partially because the US

Navy wanted to keep the extent of its sub detection capabilities secret. OceanGate was allowed to keep operating in short because they largely do so in international waters where there are less regulations. There will be an investigation, similar to a plane crash, but there's not really a lot of precedent for this type of thing. There've only been like 4 successful submarine rescues ever. And in regard to the banging – the ocean is vast, and the banging is none of our business.

You would think, with a tragic conclusion secured, the world would move on. But then of course, the James Cameron of it all. A lot of people seemed surprised when James Cameron suddenly appeared on TV in a BMX biking shirt to talk about all the ways that the Titan could have failed. It's another one of those factors that really accelerated the discourse again – it's hard to feel serious when the director of the 1997 classic Titanic is suddenly on the news for what is essentially an engineering problem. Why would James Cameron, director of the Titanic, be giving engineering advice? Well, as it turns out, Jim has visited the wreckage of the Titanic at least 30 times. He's a girly with a Special Interest. He was the second person ever to pilot a submersible to the Challenger Deep, and the first person to do it solo. He's also directed several documentaries about deep ocean exploration. He yearns for the deep. Drop him back into the Trench. Free him. In all seriousness, if you watch some of them, you can see first of all that being underwater is just kind of his Thing, and second of all, that he cares deeply about the safety of the technology. He talks extensively about the engineering, he stops shoots when things go wrong and

talks about the process of fixing them. And he brings along actual scientists to determine how to maximise the scientific value of his undertaking – what can be learned from working in an extreme environment, where is best to collect samples, how can we improve the process. He's the exact opposite of the mindset held by OceanGate.

People – quite rightly – have asked what could possibly be gained by taking people 4 kilometres underwater to look at what amounts to a gravesite that has already been thoroughly explored to the point of being 3D mapped last year. Now, I do have a Titanic horror/fascination inherited from my mother. Mum saw an old Titanic film too young, and it thoroughly traumatised her. So, she did what any good parent would do and passed that directly on, by buying 7-year-old me an encyclopaedia of Titanic facts, ensuring that I was a weird kid at school and, that 25 years later in the midst of an eerily similar set of events, a weird kid at work.

Part of what is fascinating about the Titanic is the fact that there's this decadent vessel rediscovered almost by accident. And such large pieces of it are still in-tact in such a desolate environment it's like discovering an abandoned mansion on Mars. James Cameron compared deep-sea exploration to a lunar environment, and I think the contrast between the vision of early 1900s opulence and alien decay is part of the allure. While it seems unhinged that you can just pay to be in outer space, I would rather it be James Cameron thinking about the nature of the alien on earth and delighting in the fact that he tricked Hollywood into funding it

as he did in 2009, than a bucket list check for rich people who get to take their weird obsession to the most extreme end, frankly.

Now we're at the end of the timeline, and it's time for me to think about why I actually wrote this. If I'm being honest, it's because I'm normally quite sensitive, but I didn't feel a whole lot about the submersible beyond a kind of morbid fascination. The idea of running out of oxygen at the bottom (or on the surface) of the ocean in a sealed up tube made me feel a little queasy, but as soon as the signal was lost I assumed they were dead. My heart did break when I learned that 19-year old Suleman Dawood had been frightened to go on the trip, but went because it fell over Father's Day and he wanted to appease his dad. But mostly, I'm glad it was quick. There's a great video from Hank Green that explains how quick it was if you want to feel better about that. His phrasing was like, "that point you're not biology anymore, you become physics". Which is comforting.

While I was researching this, Rax King, who's an author I adore released a piece on her Patreon. I'll link the Patreon in my show notes, but you should buy her book Tacky, which is fantastic. Anyway, she wrote about the submersible and straddling the fence between those doing the laughing and those lecturing them. She rightly points out that the sanctimonious political stuff is bullshit – the wealth isn't getting redistributed because someone died in an accident. But I loved the last lines about the ever-widening gap between the ultra-rich and the average person. I won't read

much because it's behind a paywall, but talking about the ways rich people section themselves off she says, "This is all the best stuff that money can buy and it all sucks. It doesn't work or it kills you. What's the point?"

Truly, what is the point? They're not exploring anything new, they're simply paying to stare into the void. And this time the void blinked.

Well, that's my submersible take. Honestly, I haven't been able to stop thinking about the migrant boat off the coast of Greece – it's completely broken my heart. I'll be making a small donation to some organisations here that assist asylum seekers – specifically the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre and the Refugee Advice and Casework Service. I would encourage you to look up something similar in your area. Otherwise, if you would like to talk to me about the survivors of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 and you're prepared for me to get a little intense... talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!



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**Episode written and narrated by Alex Johnson and produced by Wes Fahey. Theme tune by Wes Fahey. (Soundcloud: [lee snipes](#))**

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