

In Defense of the Laugh Track

Misc Notes

- Often talking about multi-cam vs single cam
- what laugh track shows are left (Big Bang Theory, Will and Grace, Mom, One Day at a Time, The Ranch, Disjointed)
 - Is it a coincidence that 3 of these shows are Netflix originals?
- More theatrical, allows time to hang out with characters
- people claim they're unrealistic but it's just as unrealistic to have quippy one liners ready for everything
- On top of that, a big argument against the laugh track has been its length of space. you've probably seen one of those videos that cuts out the laughs from the Big Bang Theory and makes it sound super super awkward. But that's disingenious, you can't just cut out a portion of a show and expect it to be as good, unless it's Garfield minus Garfield
- Allows for a certain spatial factor that we don't get in single cam
- Obviously there are tons of bad multi cam comedies, but there are also tons of bad single cam comedies, some of them very successful
- What we're really talking about is a rejection of the old, which is natural, but I think it's also important to remember where we came from and why it was popular in the first place
- It can also add an extra emphasis on dramatic beats by withholding the laugh track for jokes that sting or ring hollow, when things go too far
- Does the laugh track belong in everything? absolutely not. But we might be too quick to celebrate its demise
- Also important to remember that it is a tool used to fill time and thus lower the amount of writing necessary
- Just like any other tool, the laugh track is something that can be used to help or hurt a show
- People don't like the psychological trick if they don't find the jokes funny. They feel like producers are trying to fool them into liking/laughing something they don't otherwise find funny
- Do you enjoy watching comedies on your own?
- Why do we have such an aversion to this, when nobody complains about live standup comedy? Shouldn't purists be calling for jokes to be shouted into the void so that they can be judged "objectively"?

- To dislike the laugh track is to be enlightened, someone who understands real art and knows good tv, to look down on those who just eat the most popular regardless of quality. It's that kid in high school who listens to real music.
- Is it a coincidence that the laugh track and consensus tv are dying at the same time? Are we shirking communal experience in favor of more and more niche/personalized experiences in our comedies?
- Even Young Sheldon doesn't have a laugh track

How Do Laugh Tracks Work?

- I. Performances started out live but that couldn't be maintained as shows were scaled (quantity, quality)
- II. They are suuuper against laugh tracks (1:55 everyone has to hate them they're terrible)

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103104001192>

- I. We laugh if our in group laughs, not if there is just laughter in general.
 - A. This can help explain why people can be encouraged by laugh tracks in shows they like and turned off by it in shows they hate

The History of the Sitcom Laugh Track

- I. Radio marked the initial move from entertainment as a public spectacle to something you could enjoy in private
 - A. This also allowed producers to add laughs, giggle, etc even on flat jokes
- II. One of the first sitcoms to use a laugh track was The Hank McCune Show
- III. In scripted comedies, audience reaction gives diminishing returns on every subsequent take
- IV. Charles Douglass
 - A. Laff Box, each key had a different audience reaction recorded into it.
- V. In the 60s it became increasingly too expensive to film every show in front of an audience
- VI. In 1965, CBS brought in a focus group to test audience reactions to the laugh track, watching 2 versions of Hogan's Heroes (1 with, 1 without)
 - A. Laugh track version performed much better
- VII. Cosby famously refused to use a laugh track
- VIII. Historically, shows with a laugh track have performed better than those without

- IX. Billy Kelley, Dartmouth College Psychology Professor: “We’re much more likely to laugh at something funny in the presence of other people”

Who's Laughing Now? The History of the Sitcom Laugh Track

- I. “Decade after decade, the chuckles kept coming from one source or another, and those who attempt to stand in their way tend to get heckled off the stage. Today, shows like “[The Big Bang Theory](#),” “Two and a Half Men” and a slew of other Chuck Lorre originals trounce on the supposedly sophisticated, and proudly laugh track-free, self-reflexive sitcoms of the modern age. But [ratings don't lie: the laugh track is as big as ever](#).”
- II. Shows used to “sweeten” laugh tracks, mixing in good takes (audiences were mic’d separately)
- III. “Douglass’s device was almost immediately controversial. Producers requested Douglass to litter programs with laughs, but Douglass didn’t want the laughs to overpower the work. Artists sided with Douglass. However, when some artists struck back and asked networks to reign back their use of the laff box, their shows quickly descended into cancelation, as was the case with “The Monkees” and the first sitcom by up-and-coming comedic icon Bill Cosby, “The Bill Cosby Show.” This soon started a war over who controlled the box. Douglas only gave family members the key to the padlocked garage that housed the laff box, and networks began disputing over which family member would control it. Charley, the most conservative of the Douglasses, was rarely their first choice.”
- IV. “Critically revered and commercially successful shows, like “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” “Taxi,” “The Bob Newhart Show,” “Cheers,” and, of course, “Seinfeld” “sweetened” live laughs with canned ones. It wasn’t until the new millennium that TV began to shift.”
- V. “Throughout the late 90s and 2000s, the laugh track became a symbol of the unsophisticated TV show, one defiantly outside the “Golden Age of TV.” It’s hard to disagree. A shortlist of the best comedies of the era — “The Office,” “[Arrested Development](#),” “Curb Your Enthusiasm” — all managed to have huge cultural cache without forcing laughs on the viewer.”
- VI. “The age of the DVD meant that whereas before you could only watch an episode once when it broadcasted and then maybe catch it years later in syndication, you could now watch episodes over and over, picking out details and finding new jokes through repeat viewings.”
- VII. “Today, the laugh track lives in a strange space, as does the sitcom. Shows that would’ve been the perfect model of a sitcom now look and feel like a revisionary one, i.e. “Modern Family.” “How I Met My Mother” spent nine seasons having their cake and eating it, too, constructing a structurally complex series with light

laugh sweetening throughout — even though the track is noticeably quieter than other shows.”

[WATCH: ‘The Big Bang Theory’ With More Laughter Added In](#)

[The Big Bang Theory- Live Show Taping](#)

- I. These people are such big fans and are so happy to be there that they genuinely do seem to laugh at each take

[Laugh track is serious business](#)

- I. "It's not only just inventing the equipment, but knowing when to put a laugh in and when not to put it in," [Bob, his son] Douglass said. "It was a compromise, of course. Some producers would tell him exactly where they wanted it. And other producers would just let him have free rein and do it the way he felt it, because he'd been in the business so long." But even the inventor's son acknowledges that canned laughter has been poorly used." On some of the shows it was abused," Douglass said. "They wanted to keep adding more and more laughs, and it would go way overboard. They thought it was going to be funnier, and it wasn't."
- II. "It's a tool," [Bob] Douglass said. "Like music is, like sound effects, like dialogue. It's everything combined together to make a show flow along and have a nice pace to it. It's all timing."
- III. "What most people think of as a laugh track is an actual audience's laughter," he said. "Whether it's piped up or over-amped, it's usually laughter from a hundred people that are told, 'We really need you to laugh loud and everything else.' And they're trying to be helpful. So I don't know that it's a completely genuine experience even then."
- IV. Laugh-track shows also force writers into too tight a creative corner, [Linwood, Creator of of malcolm in the Middle] Boomer said. "As a [laugh-track show] writer, you find yourself needing to write something that will provoke a good, loud laugh every few seconds," he said. "As opposed to writing something that may be right for the scene or something that might be more emotionally satisfying...So we made a conscious effort at the very beginning to find a way to substitute for that sort of easy energy that laughter provides. We ended up doing an awful lot of quick cutting. We did a lot of music stings, a lot of sound effects and things that added energy to it."

- V. "Most critics think that the laugh track is the worst thing that ever happened to the medium," [Kara Ann Marling, Professor of American Studies and Art History, University of Minnesota] said. "Because it treats the audience as though they were sheep who need to be told when something is funny - even if, in fact, it's not very funny. It's probably changed comedy, particularly situation comedy. I mean, anything can be passed off as hilariously funny, at least for the first two or three go-rounds, if you've got people laughing like maniacs in the background. It's as though during a drama show, suddenly a voice in the background goes, 'Ooohh, this is scary!' or 'Oh, he looks guilty!' It seems like the next logical step if you're going to have laugh tracks."
- VI. Marling is mostly concerned about canned laughter as a symptom of a larger social willingness to accept things uncritically. That would include political messages as well as commercial messages. "It's a kind of decline in American feistiness and an ability to think for yourself," she said. "It certainly is embedded, but that doesn't make it a good thing. There are a lot of things that we do every day of the week that aren't good things. And this is one of them."

[A Laughing Matter - American Psychological Association](#)

- I. "In general, he's found, laughter isn't inspired by particularly funny remarks. Instead, it's a ubiquitous response to social situations. People laugh when they're interacting with other people regardless of the "jokiness" of the conversation, but they don't laugh when they're alone. 'Laughter and humor are related but different things,' Provine says. 'Laughter is ancient. It's a primate play vocalization. Humor is a more modern, cognitive and linguistic development. There was laughter long before there was humor.'"
- II. To do so, he began his observational studies. Several thousand examples of laughter later, he had discovered a few unexpected facts, which he summarized in a 2004 article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (Vol. 13, No. 6, pages 215-218):
 - A. Laughter was 30 times more frequent in social situations than solitary ones. When alone, people were much more likely to talk to themselves or smile than to laugh.
 - B. We often think of laughter as a response to someone else speaking. But in conversation, speakers are 46 percent more likely to laugh than their audiences are, punctuating their own talk with laughter.
 - C. Only 10 to 15 percent of prelaugh comments are even remotely funny. Often, they're as dull as "I've got to go now."

- D. People use laughter as punctuation, inserting it into specific places in the vocal stream. You might say "I'm going now, hahaha," but not "I'm going, hahaha, now." In fact, in a recent, not-yet-published study, Provine found that congenitally deaf people laughed at the same points in signing conversations that hearing people do in speaking conversations.
- E. Laughter is, as folk wisdom says, contagious. Just listening to someone else laugh can be enough to start a person laughing.

NUMBERS

2018 TV Comedy Ratings 18-49 Demo

1. Roseanne - ABC (Laugh)
2. The Big Bang Theory - CBS (Laugh)
3. Young Sheldon - CBS
4. Will & Grace - NBC (Laugh)
5. Modern Family - ABC
6. Mom - CBS (Laugh)
7. The Orville - Fox
8. The Good Place - NBC
9. The Middle - ABC
10. The Goldbergs - ABC

Netflix Comedies with Laugh Tracks

- The Ranch
- Fuller House
- One Day At a Time
- Disjointed

Emmy Nominations by year

2018 - 0/8

2017 - 0/7

2016 - 0/7

2015 - 0/7

2014 - 1/6 (Big Bang Theory)

2013 - 1/6 (Big Bang Theory)

2012 - 1/6 (Big Bang Theory)

2011 - 1/6 (Big Bang Theory)

2010 - 0/6

2009 - 1/7 (HIMYM)

2008 - 1/5 (Two and a Half Men)

2007 - 1/5 (Two and a Half Men)

2006 - 1/5 (Two and a Half Men)

2005 - 2/5 (Will & Grace and Everybody Loves Raymond, Raymond won)

2003 was the last time laugh track shows had a majority of nominations (Raymond, Friends, Will & Grace)

Where Does Canned Laughter Come From - And Where Did it Go?

- I. "Actor and producer David Niven sniffed in a 1955 interview, "The laugh track is the single greatest affront to public intelligence I know of, and it will never be foisted on any audience of a show I have some say about." But TV producers remained wed to the idea of providing some sort of audience reaction to make the viewing experience more communal; after all, audiences were still largely used to enjoying their entertainment via live performance or in the cinema, both of which provided fellow laughers."
- II. "Where we once valued guffaw-inducing hijinks, we now value the so-horrifying-they're-funny plotlines of Orange Is the New Black. Where we once valued joining the masses, now we enjoy bragging about our singular love of Bojack Horseman's black comedy."
- III. "What was once an essential element of the sitcom is now seen as the marker of an unsophisticated show for the masses, not something the cool kids would watch."
- IV. Even cartoons from the 60s like The Flintstones and The Jetsons used laugh tracks
- V. Hogan's Heroes in 65
 - A. "The show was shot with a single camera – in other words, with no studio audience – but the network, nervous about the format, tested two versions: one with canned laughter and one without."
- VI. 80s started to see the laugh track wane in UK
- VII. "The biggest American comedy hit of that decade, Seinfeld, mimicked the effect of a single camera show, using more sophisticated lighting and camera techniques and often shooting scenes on location. But its network, NBC, forced

co-creators Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld (despite David's protests) to keep the studio audience, and thus a laugh track, in the mix."

Seinfeld, and the Birth of the Cinematic Style in the Network Sitcom

- "People would say, 'Can't you make this look more like a sitcom?' And I'd say, 'I don't want to,'" recalls Cheronis. "Usually on sitcoms, everything's lit up and you don't get pretty pictures—we avoided that. I hired old-timers who could really light a multi-camera show to look pretty good. I've done a lot of sitcoms that looked like sitcoms. I was happy to do a single-camera-looking show". One episode in particular illustrates just how far *Seinfeld* had separated itself from the typical network sitcom. "The Barber" (Season 5, Episode 8) creates a zany, almost cartoonish, storyline for Jerry involving a particularly bad haircut, two Italian barbers, and Newman. The performances of the two barbers involved in the story are over-the-top in a manner *Seinfeld* would make greater use of in future seasons.
- To accomplish many of the shots needed to accentuate his stylistic ambitions, Ackerman would have to shoot before the studio audience showed up to the soundstage or take entire days before the live performance to shoot sequences.
- In "The Pothole" (Season 8, Episode 16), a shot of Jerry from the point of view of a toilet after he had dropped a toothbrush into it took the crew two hours to set-up and comprises less than two seconds of screen time.
- The most radical aesthetic experiments occurred in Season Six, however, and the final sequence of "The Race" (Season 6, Episode 10) was a stylistic turning point in both *Seinfeld* and the network sitcom.

Live Sitcom Episodes

- I. The Drew Carey Show "Drew Live"
- II. Will & Grace 801 "Alive and Schticking"

- A. Max Mutchnick and David Kohan: ""We love the idea of a live episode because we get to show the audience of *Will & Grace* what we've known from day one — we work with the best cast in network television,"
- III. 30 Rock
 - A. 504 "Live Show"
 - 1. Seinfeld money
 - B. 619 "Live From Studio 6H"
 - 1. About the history of live television
- IV. Arrested Development 309 "S.O.B.s"
 - A. Last 5 seconds is live as a marketing gimmick

Outline

- I. Introduction
 - A. State common attacks on the laugh track
 - B. Thesis: The laugh track, often derided as a crutch or easy way out, actually speaks to the heart of what makes TV great.
- II. History
- III. Multi-cam vs Single cam
 - A. Removing the laugh track
 - B. Spatial
 - 1. Stage performance
 - 2. Physical comedy
 - C. Cast chemistry
 - 1. Characters hang out together, and invite us to hang with them
 - 2. Less can be created in editing
 - 3. This is especially noticeable on the rare occasions where sitcoms go live
 - a) Differentiate between SNL and live comedy and live sitcoms
 - D. Realism
- IV. Old vs new
 - A. More and more talent is gaining power and artistic freedom, which is allowing them to finally ditch the laugh track
 - B. In groups and out groups
 - 1. What was once an essential element of the sitcom is now seen as the marker of an unsophisticated show for the masses, not something the cool kids would watch
 - C. DVD and streaming age vs broadcast
 - 1. More jokes today because we can rewatch

V. Conclusion

- A. As an industry wide standard, yes the laugh track should go the way of the dinosaur, but it certainly has its merits
 - 1. Summary of my pro points
 - 2. We should think of it as its own genre of comedy
- B. Laughter as a psychological and social phenomenon
- C. How we watch TV today, and how that communal aspect has evaporated
- D. Comfort and escape, hanging out with our people, with a group