

A lot of people hate the laugh track.

Clip show

It can feel clunky. It can feel unnatural. It can feel like Jeb Bush.

Please Clap

But it's also a major part of television history and something that is all over some of the best comedies full stop. Seinfeld? Cheers? I Love Lucy? Mary Tyler Moore? The Three Stooges? Friends? Frasier? MASH? All in the Family? All classic hilarious shows with laugh tracks.

Since the beginning many creators have pushed back against the laugh track, and now we find ourselves in a place where the number of laugh track shows has dwindled into _____ regions. Still, ratings show us time and again that laugh track shows are simply more popular than those without them, but how can that be the case if we all hate them so much?

Today, that's exactly what we're going to look at: why the laugh track gets a bad rep and why that may or may not be fair. I'm Jackson and this is Ideas At Play.

So why does the laugh track even exist in the first place? Well, TV and radio marked the first time entertainment transitioned from public venues into the comfort of our own homes, a sort of Fireside Chat and Chill if you will. The idea started as a way to make that transition less jarring, to maintain that communal aspect that had been in show business way way way longer than this newfangled technology.

These programs would be shot in front of a live studio audience with their reaction being recorded, but in scripted comedies, the reaction to each take of the same joke got a little more watered down. So Charles Douglass created a machine called the Laff Box to "sweeten" those reactions.

For executives, it was like taking candy from a baby and giving them methamphetamine. Now, every joke could be funny, or at least seem like someone thought it was funny. They used it everywhere. It wasn't just about sweetening the reaction of a studio audience but creating one out of thin air, even when it made no sense like on The Flintstones and The Jetsons. I guess the idea was that there was some animated audience just behind the animated cameras? And I think everyone today can recognize that it went too far.

But executives had good reason to push for the laugh track though. Shows tested better with it than without it, and they still do: of the 6 most watched comedies of 2018, 4 featured a laugh track. Jokes that are patently unfunny can get by, which is why there's a whole subgenre of YouTube videos showing TV sitcoms with the laugh track removed, leaving really awkward and uncomfortable silences.

Big Bang Theory clip

But in some really important cases, this critique is kind of an overcorrection. It ignores the fact that some of these sitcoms are shot in front of a live studio audience, or at least are shot on a soundstage that could have one. Yeah, there are actually people in the audience of The Big Bang Theory who think it's really funny.

Clip

Personally, I don't agree with them, but thinking about it as a stage performance does frame the show differently. It might be more reasonable to think of these shows as something that might be closer to a stand up set than, say, Airplane or Anchorman.

Clip

We don't hear anybody clamoring to get rid of the audience in stand up sets so that we can judge their jokes objectively, because it's part of the artform. Comics play on the reactions of the crowd and time their reactions accordingly. When you remove the laugh track, you're isolating the actor trying to time their next line and that's pretty weird. Think about isolating LeBron James on the basketball court without the context of where the ball is. It kind of looks like he's just standing there.

Here's a clip from Frasier with the laugh track removed.

Clip

Even though the writing and acting is much stronger, it still feels awkward. If there was no audience, no laugh track, the show would be shot and edited completely differently. So let's follow that experiment to the end and tighten everything up as if it were a modern single camera comedy.

Clip re-edited

Shows like Cheers, I Love Lucy, The Honeymooners, Everybody Loves Raymond and Seinfeld played to an audience from a stage, filmed by multiple cameras. They might have scenes that were shot on location, especially in the case of Seinfeld, for example, but this difference is apparent in the essence of these shows. The way they use space and physical comedy is completely differently than more modern, single-camera comedies.

Physical comedy [Modern Family](#), [Veep](#)

Physical comedy [Seinfeld](#), [Dick Van Dyke](#)

This isn't to say one style of comedy is better than the other, only to show how the medium opens up different avenues for physical comedy. Just think of how iconic characters on these shows enter the stage.

Will and Grace Jack, Seinfeld Kramer

Those entrances work because the actors can use the space of the stage. Frasier would often make use of elaborate sets with multiple rooms in Scooby-Doo-esque scenes that played on our — and the live audience's ability — to see the bigger picture. In that way, it's closer to theater than to film, which is maybe most on display when you see the chemistry between actors.

Obviously any show is going to need chemistry on screen to be successful, but it is often the key feature of these comedies. These characters feel like they're hanging out together, and in turn, we feel invited to hang out with them. It's something that feels organic because of how unedited the shows feel, and something that you can see on display on the rare occasion when sitcoms have produced live episodes.

30 Rock live

This is more structured than something like Saturday Night Live, but both only work because the actors can play off of each other and the audience. Will & Grace's final season started with a live episode, with creators Max Mutchnick and David Kohan saying "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."

Will & Grace live

While this theatrical style of delivering lines has been called less *realistic* because people don't leave large swaths of time in their conversations for a 3rd party to laugh, it's also not very realistic to have a witty quip at the ready for conceivable scenario.

Happy Endings, Archer, Arrested Development

When asked about creating a network comedy without a laugh track, Linwood Boomer, the creator of Malcolm in the Middle said "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."

And those choices are hilarious: *Clip*

But it's hard to make the argument that they're *realistic*. Our lives aren't edited any more than they're accompanied by canned laughter.

The point is, they're different animals. Creators have largely been against the laugh track and as they've gained more power and artistic freedom from TV executives, we've seen tons of single camera comedies with laugh tracks pop up, which has its own set of advantages.

Ditching the laugh track frees up tons of time. That time spent waiting to deliver the next joke can be filled with more and more jokes, saturating every inch of screen time with stuff that *makes* us laugh, not laughs themselves.

Clip

Losing that obligation also allows comedies to explore the entire emotional spectrum, which has been objectively amazing for television and comedy has probably never been better. But it's also disingenuous to pin that on the laugh track itself. All in The Family, The Cosby Show, and MASH are all old-school laugh track comedies that found the ability to tell stories with real emotional depth, and sometimes the absence of the laugh track could be just as powerful.

Clip show

It would be equally disingenuous to not mention how many creators have come out strongly against the laugh track. MASH and Seinfeld were two of the largest critics, MASH co-creator Larry Gelbart argued that the show should take place without canned laughter, "just like the actual Korean War." Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld did their best to create a single camera comedy, shooting on location, using different camera techniques, and unique lighting styles, only to be pigeonholed into a laugh track by NBC.

Awards shows have almost exclusively sided with the creators. Since 2005 when Everybody Loves Raymond won the Emmy for Most Outstanding Comedy, only 3 shows featuring a laugh track have been nominated, tallying just 8 the last 81 nominations.

As creators shifts away from the laugh track, these multicam sitcoms feel older and slower—which they are—but that shouldn't diminish them. The prevailing thought seems to be that anything with a laugh track is a commercial success but something we'd hardly call *art*. Those are the shows for the unsophisticated masses, not the cool kids. Especially in shows that you don't find particularly funny, the laugh track can be grating. You feel apart from the group watching the show since they're all laughing and you're not.

And I think as an industry-wide mandate, yeah, the laugh track should go the way of the dinosaur, but that's not to say the style of the multi-cam sitcom with a live audience doesn't have its place. It gives us a completely different sense of space, taking place on a stage that stretches far beyond the frame. They are places to hang out with friends. They give us a different sense of reality that can be as much a feature as a bug.

Just like anything else on TV, the laugh track is a tool that can be used for good or for evil. Inserting canned laughter into a single camera show that clearly doesn't have an audience? Evil. Performing comic theater on stage for an audience and playing off their reactions? Good.

Laughter is a social phenomenon as much as anything else, and psychologists believe that it existed long before humor. Studies have shown that people are much more likely to laugh in social situations than in response to a funny remark, and that you're much less likely to laugh alone. As much as anything else, the laugh track is an attempt to hold onto the communal aspects of television, gathering around the living room or talking over the water cooler the next day.

But that's largely not how we watch TV anymore. We watch on our laptops, at our own pace. Entire series come out at once, ready to be consumed at your convenience. The market is flooded with so many shows that everyone has their own niche, but the shared experience is coming to a close. And while we might laugh at the laugh track, it represents a real bedrock of American television: comfort and escape, hanging out with our people, with a group, together.