

It's not funny that TV humor is forced

By Eve Glicksman

I've dated enough self-absorbed jerks like Jerry Seinfeld and his pal George to find their adolescent behavior and social remarks unamusing. But what turns banal into reprehensible is that some producer-director stacks the soundtrack with contrived giggles and guffaws that rival an Ed McMahon fest.

Forget the "live" studio audiences you hear cackling in the background. Their mirth is no more authentic than Ed McMahon's. The television industry has a term called "sweetening," which means that recorded laughter and applause is added to the (ins) soundtrack when the audience's mouth isn't up to par.

I picture some geek in a soundroom dutifully inserting giggles, titters and roars. The uncontrollable laughs, of course, have been generated by a performance other than the show I'm watching. Can't I watch that show instead?

Do these TV boss think we don't notice that the howls aren't commensurate with the humor? Do they think we're going to clobber like trained seals just because other people are?

Well, yes, says Moyland Miller, a professor of media arts at Penn State University's Ab-

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ington-Ogontz campus. "It's a cheap gimmick," but it works, he says. Today, even the better sitcoms, the likes of Murphy Brown, Roseanne and Cybill, play it safe with recorded laughter.

The theory is that comedy, in particular, goes over better in groups. You laugh reflexively because other people are laughing. By cheering along, you leave your lonely living room and become part of this congenial crowd. It's about our desire for social approval — and the underlying premise that we are stupid.

Broadcasters weren't always this savvy. Studio audiences in the early days of radio were restricted not to applaud or laugh for fear of distracting home listeners. In 1932, however, when Eddie Cantor spotted his wife in the audience and grabbed her hat and fur as props, everyone let loose on air. The response to the broadcast was so enthusiastic that studio audiences were encouraged from then on to make merry. Soon,

audiences were being "warmed up."

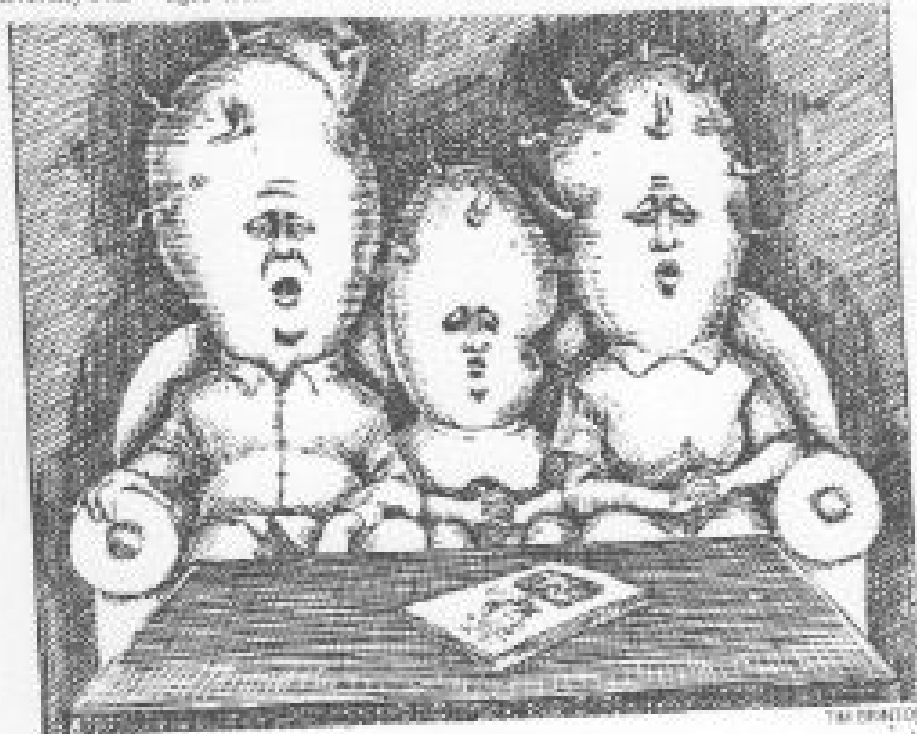
With the advent of the tube, television — not known for taking chances — likewise adopted the laugh-track as insurance against dead airtime. If the show doesn't get real laughs, at least make it seem as if the viewer's sense of humor is wanting.

Laugh tracks disguise non-comedy as comedy," says John Lorb, professor of communications at Temple. "If you took out the laughs, you wouldn't even know you were watching a sitcom." Most television episodes have to be written in three or four days which is too little time to write a really good half-hour comedy, he maintains.

The use of laugh-tracks supports those who denounce television as a passive medium. It's so pervasive that most people don't notice or mind. Perhaps the White House should start yucking up press conferences with hardy-hars from talk-show speakers to lighten up reporters.

And, back, if we need to be told to laugh, maybe a siring adagio should accompany the evening news to cue us when news is sad.

The point is, we should be making our own decisions about what's rib-tickling funny or tragic. Laugh-tracks are insulting, irritating and archaic. Our heartfelt sense of humor should be off-limits to TV impresarios who merely want to manipulate it for



profit.

After all, I write for print without the fall-back of demeaning plays to make readers hoot and holler. TV ought to follow suit. Genuine humor begets humor. And look at

The Simpsons, a show that actually plants arrested development and lets viewers laugh on their own.

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