

Is Canned Laughter Harming Our Sense Of Humor?

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For generations television shows have consisted of live audiences or canned laughter. It can be argued that the use of canned laughter has been harmful to our sense of humor. The use of canned laughter has become so prevalent that people watching at home do not even realize it is being used. When watching your favorite television show at home do you find yourself laughing by yourself at something a character said that you found funny? Or are you laughing because you hear others laughing? This topic is important because the more television shows we watch with the canned mirth may or may not be ruining our sense of humor.

When researching topics to construct my project It was brought to my attention that the show Big Bang theory isn't as funny as I thought it was. I watched a couple of episodes with and without the canned laughter incorporated. When watching the episode without canned laughter it was awkward, weird, boring, and drawn out. The characters had long pauses throughout their conversations to give time to incorporate the laughter. I did not find myself laughing as much or at all like I was when watching the episode with the canned laughter integrated. I felt almost as if It wasn't funny. It was more of people being socially awkward and not fulfilling a normal conversation. It was irrelevant to how people actually interact with one another. Is canned laughter harming our sense of humor? The laughter incorporated into television to build mirth from a joke could be harming our sense of humor. I look through the interdisciplinary lenses of history, sociology, and psychology to receive information to build a conclusion. The history will build an understanding of canned laughter as a whole. Sociology will focus on our sense of humor along with psychology the thought of humor. Lastly we will use that evidence to construct a conclusion.

Healthy Humor

An element of humor is the positive feedback of emotion that feeling of mirth after. “When people engage in humor and laughter, they tend to feel more cheerful and energetic, and less depressed, anxious, irritable, and tense. In the short term, at least, humor seems to boost positive moods and counter-act negative emotions. Thus, one way a sense of humor may be beneficial to mental health is by contributing to one's ability to regulate or manage emotions, which is an essential aspect of mental health” (Gross and Mufioz, 1995). Through humor people are able to express themselves. When having a problem or a difficult situation if people were to joke with one another about it then they would release these distraught emotions and change their perceptions of the situation and emotional state to become happier and laugh about the situations. Humor gives us the opportunity to turn a bad situation that may get us down to a good situation to smile about. “Although it is essentially a form of social play enabling us to have fun and derive emotional pleasure from nonserious incongruities, humor serves a number of important and "serious" psychological functions, which have likely contributed to our survival as a species. Some of the benefits of humor derive from the positive emotion associated with it, and many of these were likely already present in the laughter-evoking rough-and-tumble play activities. (Martin, R. A) When using humor in the play stage to cope with a bad situation they make their situation a little better even if it gives that person a little bit of mirth it changed the perspective of that bad situation a little better for a short time period. This could boost a sign of hope or show that individual that it is going to be okay and that they can use humor to get through what they are going through. Enjoyment through humor helps build happiness it takes away from the stress and sorrow being felt at that moments and give people a sign of hope and contentment.

Canned Laughter

In the 1940s a problem arose and Charley Douglass had the solution. The problem was a live audience laughed and expressed a joke was funny on the first run but on the second take the audience didn't laugh because they already heard the punch line. Charley Douglass decided to make a box, which isn't really a box it looks like an old typewriter that produces laughter noises. When pressing one of the keys or buttons on Douglass's invention the box would play a range of laughter's. Depending on what key or button you press results on the laugh you get. The buttons range from having a baby laughing, a manly belly laugh, a high pitched laugh, or a big crying laugh. The pitches and outcome are all different. This was a solution to not rely on the audience to give off a quality laugh. This laugh box gave television a huge break they have created a theater experience at the audience's home. "This not only gave that communal experience to people at home, but also helped shape the structure and pacing of modern sitcoms." (Artificially Sweetened) It was a revelatory moment for TV, one that most positive influential takes on television. Some big television shows that used canned laughter are: Shows that include Canned laughter: The Office, Arrested Development, Bill Cosby Show, friends, and Seinfeld. The box created an experience where it made the audience at home feel like they're part of a bigger crowd sitting in a movie theater or at a comedy club.

Sociology

When talking about sociology we talk about social behavior. When telling a joke, you need two people. Humor and laughter imply a social relationship, a connection between self and other. You can not tell yourself a joke you are either the one telling the joke or on the receiving end of it. We use humor to fit in, we have those inside jokes with your friends, that's how we know who is in our not. If they laugh at a joke that is a memory or something they find funny,

then those people are friends and if you are out of the loop then you won't get it. Humor reflects a contrast upon the meaning between two different people. It's how you can tell if you are friends or not. It's the quality in conversation the signs of humor are you smiling, laughing, chucking, nodding your head it's the signs we give each other when we are enjoying the conversation. "Laughter is social. It's easier to laugh with people. In a movie theater, you don't need a laugh track, but at home, watching television, you're probably alone or with just a few others" says Sam Denoff (2008) Canned laughter gives us that experience it makes us feel as if we have others watching the same television show as us and when they find something funny we get this comfort knowing that we can also find it funny as well and we can also laugh. Humor needs two people to succeed or for that matter to fail. Because you can not involve in humor with yourself yes you may find something funny on television but that's you interacting with a character being played.

Psychology

Humor can be used in many different ways but the way that humor is perceived and received in the brain is through the discipline of psychology. "it is essentially a type of mental play involving a lighthearted, nonserious attitude toward ideas and events, humor serves a number of "serious" social, emotional, and cognitive functions." (Martin, R. A). People can be creators of humor, amusing others and making them laugh but they can also respond to humor created by others. Humor is a positive emotion it makes us feel good you can not laugh while having a frown on your face. It's an emotion called mirth, this mirth is stimulated during the process called play. This is when we use our humor signs: smiling, laughing, chucking, and nodding. Humor takes many forms through canned jokes, spontaneous conversation, irony, and puns. The more parts of our brains that are involved in the social context of humor the more we

think something is funny. The ability to perceive the humor and appreciate the joke is having a sense of humor. Humor touches on all parts of our daily lives through play socially, cognitive, emotional, and expressively. The way our brain acts when perceiving this information is the tricky part and lots of studies are being done to figure out what parts of our brains do what when taking in humor. If more parts of are brain are working to comprehend the information of a joke, then the more we are going to find it funny.

Studies Show

When looking throughout multiple different studies I found some very interesting research to answer my question. A study done in 1974 had a group of people all the same age and all surprisingly right handed split up in two groups. They told the groups the same jokes but one group heard canned laughter after every joke and the others did not. People who were told a series of jokes both laughed more and rated them as funnier when the jokes were followed by recorded laughter. They described it as if the canned laughter was a form of "conformity pressure," suggesting that we laugh along in order to fit in. (Kuipers, G) I guess that means if you do not laugh then your out you don't fit in and you are awkward? I'm a little worried on why the people fell into that type of pressure. When hearing other people laugh it initiated the people listening to laugh as well. Almost as if the fake laughter was giving the listeners an okay to think it was funny and respond with laughter.

Another study that I looked at compared student's reactions to an episode of "Seinfeld," which had the canned laughter incorporated, to those watching "The Simpsons" which didn't include the canned laughter. When analyzing the results from the study it shows multiple parts of the brain in effect but the scans were the same. With or without the canned laughter the brain scans showed both shows making the people laugh. The brain scans suggested that people found

the same things funny and the same regions of their brain lit up whether or not they heard others laughing. While his findings may give reason to do away with the laugh track, the creator of the study Kelly says: “They can give people pointers about what's funny and help them along. But when done poorly, he admits, you notice a laugh track and it seems unnatural and out of place.” (Kuipers, G) This meaning with or without the laugh track people were still in play mode and enjoyed the humor. “We're much more likely to laugh at something funny in the presence of other people.” Says Kelly. (Kuipers, G) That being why the canned laughter was invented in the first place to give viewers at home the experience of having others experiencing the television show with them. Depending on the person though someone might need that extra push on knowing that it is okay to laugh and that others find it funny too.

Conclusion

Through all my research I came to the conclusion that Canned laughter is harming our sense of humor. I think canned laughter is being over done, it is becoming annoying and irritating. I think shows should prefer the audience's authentic reactions to their humor and punch lines rather than being persuaded to laugh because others or a recording is laughing. Canned laughter was created to give the audience at home an experience as if we were in a theater with others. But I'm a little bitter by the fact Charles Douglass thinks I need to be persuaded to laugh at something. That television show producers think I need someone to laugh with me for me to enjoy it more. I think canned laughter is ruining our sense of humor it is forcing us to laugh. I think its getting us to think more things are funny when they are not. I think television shows need to let the viewers decide for themselves when and how much something makes them laugh. I don't think people need the initial push or persuasion to laugh at something they may not think is funny. I think canned laughter over does sitcoms and television shows. We may find something

more funny with another person so be it, I can watch my favorite show over and over but may laugh a little bit harder if I have a friend with me. The fact that canned laughter persuades us to laugh and find things funny are not okay we need to be the judge on whether something is or isn't funny to us without others input.

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