# *No Laffing Matter*
## The Laugh Track as More than a Function of Discourse

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### Introduction

Initially, recorded laughter was technically inseparable from a Radio or Television broadcast studio performance's audio. It was sound emanating from a studio performance-present "live audience" that could not be isolated from the recording of the audio/action of the stage or studio performance. However, since the 1940's, that has all changed. With developments in sound technologies audio engineers acquired the tools for assembling pre-recorded laughter. Accordingly, most broadcast audience laughter has been generated as its own track of sound, and made separately from the source of laughter. So, not only do we, as viewers of a TV broadcast, not see the audience from which the laughter derives, but the accompanying laughter is never elicited at the very instance of what gets performed. For all intents and purposes, the laughter of a laugh track precedes the performance with which it is coupled. In effect, beyond the individually produced track, *any* pre-recorded laugh track is a part of a vast reserve of re-purposed and/or generative audience-based auditory responses.

The focus of this paper is to explore the laugh track by how it is constituted as a system productive of already exhausted material. I build on current trends in film and media studies that bring focus to the relations between different media while attending to historically conditioned forms of address. By paper's end, I wish to add to these expansive lines of inquiry and attendant methodologies by initiating how to engage particular media formations beyond the dominion of coherentist and instrumentalist approaches. Opening up a path for examining the laugh track as an auto-generative archive, largely centred on the "Laff Box" as localized formation I seek to move analysis towards engaging the laugh track, as I characterize, as a perverse and paradoxical system of archiving.

By itself, the Laff Box, a beacon of invention in the history of the modern laugh track, stands as a source of intrigue. Created at the very end of the 1940's, its inventor Charley Douglass went to extraordinary lengths to conceal both the re-generative workings of his machine and the contents of its production. The Laff Box represents a fascinating period of inventiveness in laugh track lore, but its treatment also indicates a more technical and media specific insight. At the very instance of generating a simulation of an idealized audience response the Laff Box is also a compiling of recorded and re-recorded or encoded and re-encoded, effectively *always already*, remediated data that constitutes a particular system of archivation. Needless to say, no laugh track theorist has followed up on this—not much is actually written on the laugh track as a materio-mechanical formation. Thus, another approach is required to re-position the general discussion of the laugh track from being predominantly analyzed as TV sitcom-action related phenomena to being an archive-authorized electronic artefact.

To a large extent, Jonathan Sterne's (2003) notion of *transduction* will be provide entry for my approach to studying the laugh track conceived as a sound reproduction technology. In order to avoid "predetermin[ing] the history of sound reproduction" by the "positing of a transcendental subject of hearing" Sterne attends to each sound technology as being unique transformative processes (21). Whether it is for television, radio, the changes in the phonograph or certain digital sound technologies, he considers each invention to operate by historically specific "logics" and particular material realities that have come to constitute each format of sound reproduction. What I take to be instructive is his concept of history. He resists an inclination towards a generalized vision of history governed by logics of progress and succession. So, instead of rationalizing the laugh track and Laff Box, in particular, as being historical or part of a larger ongoing project, I will attend to the transformative mechanisms of its system. This is not to abstract a sound reproduction technology from the "flow of the world." Rather, it is to contend with how a cultural artifact may be integral to the material realities and detailed operations of a cultural practice(s).

The laugh track is obviously a sound reproduction technology. However, shifting away from the discipline of sound studies, we see its transformation as a so-called special effect is not only dictated by inventions in sound technology particular to radio or television. As stated above, the laugh track is influenced by other seemingly non-sound based processes that make it into its own material *registry*, or archive. With that said, the laugh track archives sounds/voices but it is not a sound archive *per* se. It is neither overtly conceived nor developed within the standard preservationist strictures of sound archive protocol and procedure. Accordingly, appropriate to a contemporary analytic about the archive, I draw from the work of media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst (2012), and, to some extent, the media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1999). By their approaches, somewhat akin to Sterne's approach, we may explore how media formations are artifacts emerging from distinct material and technological conditions. Specifically, we may examine the laugh track assemblages as temporal configurations, storage mechanisms and calculations for forms of visceral effusion.

However, given that I ultimately conceive of the laugh track as a paradoxical formation, my analysis actually sets the stage for a confrontation. As such, I broaden my analysis of the laugh track media formation by introducing key conceptual challenges to Ernst's media archaeology present in the work of media *an*archaeologist Siegfried Zielinski (2006). Zielinski's *an*archaeology runs appositional to Ernst's analysis. Zielinski resists the form and force of the discursive regimen of media archaeology. Thought broadly, he sees past Kittler and Ernst's potent interpretations of influential 20th century thinkers like Martin Heidegger (1977) and Claude Shannon (1948) that provide the grounds for their technodeterminist approaches to media. Conversely, Zielinski's work reminds us of the play inherent in Shannon's love of puzzle-making and puzzle-solving and of Heidegger's recasting of *techne* within the incalulable *existentiel* to and fro of concealing and revealing. Zielinski gets us to consider what is often assumed as useless and yet haunts media archaeological regimes. In kind, I thereby look to engage the laugh track media formation in terms of what an archive does not and cannot contain. Ultimately, inspired by Zielinski, we may thus, in turn, develop lesser-circumscribed new discourses on media that illuminate the indeterminate and/or paradoxical nature of technological systems.

### Nuts and Bolts of the Laugh Track

Broadcast industry expressions like "canned," "sweetening," or even "de-sweetening" are typically used to refer to either the form of production or the effect that simulates and/or augments the reaction of a live audience when mixed with laughter. "Canned" denotes a generic quality, often carrying the stigma of pejorative expressions such as "inauthentic," "stock," "hackneyed," and "trite." However, when technically considered, canned also refers to the typical form or standard for a broadcast-produced component, which may be used in varying contexts and can have vast distribution amongst broadcast productions worldwide. And, although "canned laughter" may simulate the supposed spontaneous and immediate reactions of an audience (chortling, giggling, guffawing during a comic routine), as touched on above, this pre-recorded accompaniment *often* lacks any temporal and material connection to the source of humor to which it ultimately gets associated. To these ends, cultural theorist Rose Kohn Goldsen (1977) asserts,

The audiences that produced the roars, titters, and chuckles of the canned laugh tracks these shows splice into their tapes, the gags that set them off, the actors delivering the lines, the shows themselves—have all long since passed on, many of them dead and buried literally as well as figuratively. But the laughter they produced or elicited has been immortalized electronically and is used over and over in shows distributed throughout the nation, throughout the world (68-69).

However dispersive and isolable tracks and components of track assemblage are, the production of these physically distinct laughter encoded rolls, discs and hard-drives bare the traces (tracks and traits) of canned laughter historically organized and generated by laugh machines that date back to shortly after the second World War. Two well-known versions of these machines are the "Jayo Laugher" and the Laff Box, the latter of which will be a focus of my analysis (as a system of archivation). In the early 1950's the Laff Box became the industry standard. As mentioned above, the machine was invented by CBS sound engineer Charley Douglass. It was approximately ten times the size of the squat six-buttoned box console Jayo Laugher.[1] Its cabinetry, when its doors are open, reveals an elongated typewriter comprised of thirty two keys along with an organ-like foot-pedal. These are connected (through a system of key triggered rod and pulley-activated interchangeable spools) by varying lengths of audiotape which retain over 320 pre-recorded laughs (ten separate laughs on each of the thirty two tape-loops). The individuated laughs, with tape locations sourced by accompanying written registry of descriptions, provided the Laff Box technician with what ostensibly was an infinite number of combinations for generating a requisite pre-recorded laugh track.



*Fig. 1* The *Laff Box* and the *Jayo Laugher*[2]

Within the greater broadcast production apparatus, the Laff Box effectively stored and generated an expanding store of laughter by the seemingly always-proliferating tracks that, in fact, are still being dispersed throughout the broadcast world. In this way, the Laff Box represents a prototype digital archive medium for which the pieces/bits of data comprise an expanding memory aid apparatus. A labyrinth unto its own, to which we will return in coming sections.

## Laugh Track as Discursive Function

Literature specific to the laugh track often either relies on or assumes laughter's ineffable potency assigned by certain 20th century philosophers. In spite of populist characterizations as a universal language, *laughter* is analyzed for its non-linguistic or extra-discursive impact. Laughter has been theorized by philosopher Henri Bergson (2008) as a relief mechanism in the socialization process. Conversely, laughter has been declared by Georges Bataille (2014) as a non-productive and radically sovereign expenditure that is neither reducible to a communicative act nor reinforcing of a social order. For both Bergson and Bataille, laughter is thought

more in terms of a bodily gesture than within the determinations of spoken language. It is considered a rupture to the economy of rules governing discursive practices. Manifest as spasms, both auditory and bodily, laughter is thus felt as independent of and even as a violation of reason and regulated behaviour. Influenced by either Bergson or Bataille (at least within the Humanities), laughter, as the mechanical auditory construct of the broadcast industry's regime of production, is thus seen as a mischievous force.

At the same time, laughter is a fake feature of entertainment while also a representation of an implicit unspeakable viscerality, a catalyst that is "seriously" felt as integral to the human experience. The laugh track is thus viewed askance. It is often considered as having questionable import for and impact on the broadcast experience. Along these lines, from the the *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Media and Communication* (2012), we find a somewhat pejorative account:

> It [canned laughter] functions as a stimulus to audience laughter with the hint that all of us listening or watching are findin the programme funny. There is no room on the laugh track for the dissenting sounds of those who wish to express a contrary view (154).

Within the hierarchy of cultural knowledge, the laugh track is designated a supplement. The laugh track, regardless of being established within the practices of broadcast production, is seen to violate reputable productivity by standards of verisimilitude and authentic communication. In this respect, the laugh track is understood as a manipulative by-product of the broadcast industry.[3] Likewise, cultural theorist Slovoj *Žižek (2005)* reads our relationship to the laugh track framed in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms. In his obituary for the Laff Box creator Charley Douglass he declares that the laugh track deprives the sitcom viewer of their own "passive" enjoyment. For *Žižek* the sitcom presentation, in laughing for the TV viewer, creates a lack within one's so-called "authentic experience." Governed by the machinations of the contemporary capitalist order, the laugh track serves to fill our individual processes of reception with an unrelenting busyness. By *Žižek's* account, the laugh track represents a form of organized relief designed to give a consumer-based directive to what may have otherwise been lived out as our own idle time. Entirely artificial in kind, it executes a sinister objective to condition an audience response. Apart from *Žižek*, for various other media critics, the laugh track underscores and masks the broadcast industry's insecurities and greedy designs on profits. Readily dismissed as an instrument within an industry's productive process, it is a baldly deceptive tool for the representation of an idealized audience. In this way, we restrict understanding the laugh track as a derided form of expression within the domain of cultural knowledge. It is a "thing" of knowledge that merely relays a truth about the character and quality of a particular ideologically-driven broadcast experience.

On the surface, recently certain *liveness*-based theorists appear to have shifted analysis of the laugh track to a less disparaging form of observation. Television and media theorists like Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore (2011) focus on certain instances of a designed purpose for and actual reception of a laugh track. Kalviknes Bore, in particular, focuses her research in the creative decisions or intentions of an industry practice. That is, given the industry-research metric-guided conceptualization of a TV program's target-audience, she asks what the particular use of a given laugh track means in context. Beyond industry goals, Kalviknes Bore situates her research within the broader discussion of television's capacity for creating a sense of *liveness*, specifically for how the human voice has resonance with audiences:

> Within the context of this wider critical debate [technological immediacy of television and authentic portrayal of reality], the continued use of the laugh track in recorded TV comedy can be seen as an attempt to maintain a sense of liveness in prerecorded comedy in order both to "borrow" some of the cultural prestige associated with live television and to retain the sense of communal laughter traditionally associated with popular comedy (25).

For Kalviknes Bore the laugh track has a specific or "intended" role in mediating between industry and audience. She specifies the nature of this role:

The laugh track can be seen to have two key functions. One of these is to offer individual viewers a sense that "we" are all watching and laughing at the program together, as a collective audience…A second, related function of the laugh track is to ensure that the comedy feels like a "safe" space where it is okay to laugh at people's misfortunes or transgressions (24).

Analyses of the laugh track centred on *liveness* and the voice as potent for conveyors of collective feeling are important for understanding forms of contemporary performance and spectatorship. However, what I wish to point out is that buried within the main objective of Kalviknes Bore's particular audience-reception study is the common but rather critical move to appoint the laugh track as neutral-appearing (technological) "device." It is thus presumed to be operative for a communicative comedic process that conveys "intent" for the broadcast experience. Put another way, this form of analysis, though designed to question whether or not laugh tracks are effective, relies on a certain prejudice within media studies. It institutes comedic content as conjoined with a technology thought of only as a mediating function. We see the laugh track is simply thought formulaically. It is just another instance of a mediating component mythically bridging the universal communicative divide between sender and receiver or source-of-word meant for an intended listener. In this manner, studies on the laugh track are set within and shaped by a notion of "the technological" as locale for a kind of lexical resource (the common expressions being: device, effects, function). It is host that systematically signals the *systematicity* of mediatic relations and actions. We hereby assume the laugh track—neutral in kind but readily ascribable as particular function—to be a "device" that gives the theorist leverage, even poignancy, for explaining conditions, formations as well as the transformations that occur within what has been generalized as the current identifiable (and seemingly unified) social practice of making comedy.

To be sure, not all laugh track theorists align with Bloomsbury's pejorative definition nor assume the laugh track as device productive of information within an instrumentalist model of communication. Media/sound theorist Jacob Smith (2005, 2008) and digital humanist Jeff Scheible (2015) bring needed focus to the materialist registries of the laugh track, specifically in terms of sound and inscription. Smith, in his book *Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* (2008), provides a historically detailed and class-savvy account of our relation to particular voice and sound technologies wherein laughter, among other human vocal emissions, was deployed as strategy to put the listener at ease with the likely foreign-to-the-ear speech reproduction machines. Smith gets us to research the laugh track's origins beyond the historical development of radio and television. Still, although Smith directs our attention to sound reproduction technologies as the materialization of auditory emissions, his broader objective is to make sense of the connective tissue between human vocal performance and machines. He inscribes *the human* into the making of *the technological*—a machine's history is dependent on the unfurling of a social or humanist trajectory.

In direct contrast to Smith, Scheible (2015) analyzes the laugh track textually. Scheible "reads" the laugh track as suggestive of an anxiety over conveying meaning. He notes that the laugh track often, within the written registry of industry script-form, appears in brackets. It takes form inaudibly, concealing textual inadequacies or meanings of a TV script that are not and cannot be heard. However, learning from sound theorist Jonathan Sterne (2003) we identify a certain prejudice lurking within both Smith's and Scheible's analyses. In the end, their analyses of the materialist registries of the laugh track lead us to problems similar to those exposed above. Both these stories of media play off of and indirectly reinforce the discipline of sound studies' theoretical "mainframe." As Sterne points out, it is a discipline organized by the two opposing philosophical camps, *oral* and *graphic/written*. Again, we see the laugh track is simply understood by how it and for what it functions. The laugh track is readily assigned the status of a mechanism for performing and doing something to then be analyzed within a productive frame of, in this instance, sound theory. However, I argue that in its presumed transparency as a function within a productive apparatus, the laugh track's culturally rationalized technicity actually serves to mark our deafness, perhaps even dumbness, towards its material history as a media formation. The very absorption of the laugh track within the positivist frame of a media knowledge production apparatus is not simply due to a theoretical blind spot amongst cultural hist-

ory biased media theorists. Rather, the readable cultural play of a laughter-producing device is implicitly but necessarily marked against an assumed category of *nonknowledge*. This category represents the incomprehensibly monotonous mechanical operation for generating sounds of laughter. As such, this "mechanical operation" that holds place for a productive *nonknowledge* apparently never needs to be examined. In this sense, the laugh track is readily relegated to being a technical intervention in service of a generalized desire. It is a base formation at the margins of the cultural historian's knowledge production process. Effectively, a line is drawn at the laugh track's brute mechanicality.

Fortunately, Sterne provides more than critique of an approach to the discipline of sound theory. As touched on earlier, he gives us insight into approaching the history of media technologies by their own transformative processes. In this respect, Sterne attempts to steer sound studies, at least those studies focused on the history of reproduced sound, away from the metaphysical ideal of authenticity, fixed truths governing audition, or a disguised logo-centrism. By his analytic, notions of authenticity are contingent. They are predicated on the always in flux transformativity of recording machines. Thus, the so-called *real* of our cultural experience and practice is conditioned by machines as being amongst more machines. Sterne writes,

> This history of sound begins by positing sound, hearing, and listening as historical problems rather than as constants on which to build a history. So let us take a ride on Ockham's razor and work from a simpler definition of sound-reproduction, one that does not require us to posit a transcendental subject of hearing: modern technologies of sound-reproduction use devices called *transducers*, which turn sound into something else and that something else back into sound. My definition is certainly reductive and incomplete, but it is a very instructive reduction. It offers us a useful starting point for a history of sound reproduction, especially for a history that will proceed analytically rather than chronologically. Even though transducers operate on a very simple set of physical principles, they are also cultural artifacts (2003, 22).

Sterne approaches sounds studies independently of an opposition between the listening subject and sound technology. He engages sound reproduction technologies by the measure of their own terms or, rather, what they do practically. Sterne's medium-centred research represents a significant departure from commitments to sound as a subject-centred historical phenomenon. He circumvents the chronos-based thesis that projects an inherent human-registry-mechanism, such as we see with Smith's account of the laugh track, onto the operation and transformation of machines. Instead, proceeding analytically rather than chronologically, we attend to the conditions supporting the material transformation of sounds into other forms of sound.

To go forward, I extend the terms for analyzing and researching the specific "re-productiveness" of the laugh track. I believe Sterne's conception of the sound technologies is furthered through the media archaeologist's technologically-centred approach to media. Ultimately, as I have been staging, we have no grounds for asserting that the laugh track is a mere tool of a broader system. Certainly, it is a part of one. However, subsuming it within a cause/effect analysis ignores how the laugh track may be generative, not only of more laugh track but, of the very system it operates within. As media archaeologist Jussi Parikka observes: "we do not so much have media as we are media and of media" (2010, xxvii). Media, by various processes of so-called inquiry and knowledge production, are further activated as methods of description and formulation that, in effect, generate more apparatuses. Thereby, any system of knowledge is determined by discourses that are actually by-products of the workings of technology. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler makes this point rather acutely: "Once technological media guarantee the similarity of the dead to stored data by turning them into the latter's mechanical product, the boundaries of the body, death and lust, leave the most indelible traces" (1999, 55). In effect, it is the machinery that authorizes and "guarantees" how the past will survive. More specifically, we are confronted by material registries determining how and what we relate to as the past and present. For Kittler, it is not simply that the seemingly incorruptible proximity between times now and before has been greatly lessened. More to the point, the very means for doing so, an archivo-electro-mechanicality, engages the particulars of the past as mediality-specific governed objects. The past is thus represented within an always-in-the-present matrix of reproducibility (be it by a

phonograph or by filming apparatus).[4] In parallel with Kittler's claim that the developments in data storage foster new articulations of our relations with bodies and objects, I contend the laugh track to be an archival system that negotiates past vocal effusions as a mechanicalized future occurrence. Its stored assemblages of dissociated source-indeterminate laughter have helped re-position affects of immediacy as products of an external time metric. In other words, we may explore the laugh track as its own transformative process, or as Sterne proposes, by "proceed(ing) analytically." Accordingly, in the next section, I turn to media archaeology as method for exploring how media formations like the laugh track are artifacts that emerge from distinct material and cultural conditions.

### Into the Archive: The Laugh Track as a Non-Discursive Media Formation

In its early assembly, "canned laughter" was spliced together on quarter inch audiotape glued to a large wooden wheel. The first known instances from which laugh tracks were devised actually come from when recorded laughter *itself* became an object of fascination to radio programme producers. Prior to 1949, laughter was, among other auditory gestures such as clapping and cheering, just another indicator of the live studio audience. However, during an off-colour routine for a radio show at ABC Studios in Hollywood, the studio audience's overly-exuberant response changed that.[5] Though the stage material broke with community standards and could not be broadcast, producers (Bing Crosby in particular) saw potential in the accompanying and, in this instance, "stand-alone" recorded laughter. This put in motion the specific extraction and salvaging procedures that shortly thereafter led directly to the invention of the abovementioned Laff Box.

An obvious pragmatic gain for the broadcast industry's switch to a system of pre-recorded laughter was that instead of relying on the pell-mell regulatory regime of cue cards for prompting an audience to "laugh" or "cheer" or "applaud," pre-recorded laugh tracks enabled TV and radio producers to place audience response under their discretion and control. Thereby, pre-recorded laugh tracks could be better regulated for conveying what studio producers imagined as the appropriate audience auditory reaction or immediate visceral reception of a comedic action or routine. Most mechanically, in a chain reaction, the recorded laughter would then likely trigger a similar response in the broadcast audience. With that said, on the face of things, extraction and salvaging appear as the primary acts for mechanically manufacturing laughter—that is, for making laughter into a stored, manipulable and isolated response. However, editing and saving techniques only reinforce the laugh track as a form of reserve. In one sense, the actual materials salvaged contain a registry of attributes. They are their own reserve of qualities that precede the technical procedures for mechanical assembly and ordering. In effect, the recorded laughs come to the sound engineer as spent and tested production mechanisms. They are pre-packaged quanta of (vocal) effusion. The Laff Box, for example, is a reserve constituted by its collection of pre-calibrated (thus already reserved) equations of culture's viscera. However, in another sense, in terms of an archival formation, the Laff Box, though its retrieval techniques are productive in configuring more group laughs, is already destined to be reproductive. Obviously, this is quite unlike the classical archive that preserves the discrete and unique particulars of an entity's *fonds*. Further, caution over formulating the nature of this archival formation is needed. Charley Douglass' laugh machine is really only crudely understood if thought as system-host to precedent assembly mechanisms. Here, Ernst provides some crucial insight:

> In media-archaeological awareness, this recording [an early wax cylinder recording of any given song] primarily memorizes the noise of the wax cylinder itself—which is a different kind of "archive," not cultural-historical but cultural-technological, a different kind of information about the real (2011, 250).

Ernst identifies the media object—a wax pressing from yesteryear—as an "archive." It houses a memory available for not only formulating historical accounts of a culture, but of a culture's technological past. Placing the archive in quotes, he elaborates on his divergent interpretation. The recording is "a different kind of archive" from the traditional archive. This is because as technologically contrived memory, the

medium possesses certain attributes that, apart from the conveyance of information (e.g. a message in song form), organize our experience and/or "information about the real." Effectively, like Kittler, Ernst seeks to explore the very technological conditions (its terms and rules) for content coming into being. As with Sterne, Ernst's approach is entirely *analytical*. His archaeological method avoids a human-biased narrative, independent of human subjectivity and universal temporal frameworks for story-telling. Very focused on a medium's attributes, Ernst initiates a highly detailed engagement with, by their different modes of quantification, the rules particular to these kinds of systems. Developing on Kittler's observations concerning how data storage systems mediate our experience with the past, Ernst brings focus to contemporary databases as discrete and dynamic temporal media formations. He shows how archives are preeminent for understanding media. Apart from serving as an historical aid to memory, archives are to be examined as distinct sets of rules and practices for data storage. Likewise, I will now look to explore regulatory mechanisms that authorize and organize the laugh track, and specifically the Laff Box, as an archival formation. These mechanisms are revealed by decisions and practices that, often without forethought, simply maintain regimens of production. The actual memory the archive has is then not only to be thought in terms of what it contains, but in terms of what it does by its appropriative mechanisms for maintaining information as "data," for how they execute storage.

Just prior to the invention of the Laff Box, although mechanical ingenuity may have been largely attributable to technicians, the broadcast industry's "creative types" had a significant impact on advancing the laugh track. Famous American singer and actor Harry Lillis "Bing" Crosby was instrumental for his monetary investments and innovations in broadcast production techniques. He prompted the transition from recording on electrical transcription discs to the more edit-friendly reel-to-reel tape recording technology. Crosby recognized the potential of tape recording as a time-saving measure. Exploiting the early *Magnetophon* tape machine's editing capability, he limited each of his studio performances to "one-offs." Accordingly, without the demands of a repeat performance, a show's recording was re-broadcast, in the designated evening timeslots, to audiences in other time-zones. This is where media archaeology can be most prescient. It helps to bring focus to the conditions and processes by which media formations come to sort, order, and calculate as they do. As Ernst explains, "The archaeological gaze ('theory,' in the ancient sense of insight) is such a way of looking at media objects: enumerative rather than narrative, descriptive rather than discursive, infrastructural rather than sociological, taking numbers into account instead of just letters and images" (2011, 251). Specific to the development of the laugh track, here framed within the temporal economy of radio broadcast scheduling, Crosby was the first to put the laugh track to use as "audio-fill." It stood in for lost time generated from those segments of a performance in which there were miscues that needed to be edited out. The laughs ensured a full thirty minutes of air-time was met. So, although laughter simulated the "live" response Crosby felt appropriate for his gags, it also served a pragmatic function. Certainly, the laugh track contributed to a show's overall *entertainment affect*. However, it is also significant as an auditory cover-up. To solve an industry-generated timing problem it was deployed as, in the form of a quantized extra-discursive grammar of vocal punctuations, a reserve of timing mechanisms. As much as it could be used for its content the laugh track was thus put in circulation for the particular measurable attributes of its objectness. In effect, Crosby was thinking about media not only for what it is designed to do but for its generative capabilities. The laugh track was something other than a content resource of laughs.

Since Crosby's innovation, many in the TV broadcast industry have considered the laugh track an unnecessary technical intervenion. One of the most famous instances highlighting the tension concerning the use of laugh tracks is the well-publicized quarrel between directors and producers of the enormously popular 1970's American television series *M*A*S*H*. Set within the 1950s Korean War, *M*A*S*H* followed the daily challenges facing a "crack team" of doctors deployed in the heart of enemy territory. Although the actual social and political context for *M*A*S*H* had much gravitas for the American public—it was an allegory for American military involvement in the then ongoing Vietnam War—it was not strictly a drama. The script was peppered with comedic lines and antics. For its time, the broadcast industry and crit-

ics considered the series a watershed moment for TV. Its themes often explored identity, sexuality, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and other contentious social formations. *M\*A\*S\*H*'s creator and writer Larry Gelbart was obligated by the network to use a laugh track. Gelbart was clearly opposed to this, but the executives, citing their impact on test audiences, deemed laugh tracks necessary for maintaining high ratings (Gitlin 1983, 33). Ratings aside, Gelbart felt his creation was cheapened:

> Our most notable loss was on the matter of the laugh track. CBS would never let us do away with it no matter what other compromises they were willing to make. So there it is, on almost every episode, a recording of people guffawing at material they never heard, a good many of them long dead. The only thing I ever learned from the track was that while I can't be sure of life, we all have a chance at a laugh after death (*Gelbart Papers*, Online Archive of California, Box 36, Folder 5, 2).

From a cultural history perspective, the gravity of the subject matter and experience of 20$^{th}$ century warfare was trivialized. The laugh track was just another way for sanitizing both art and social commentary. Ultimately, a vacant gesture cobbled together from a cluster of voices of those well-disconnected, even by death, laugh tracks reinforced commercialized entertainment objectives. However, from a media archaeological perspective, the affects of Gelbart's rejection indicate more than a rhetorical ploy. In the above quote, Gelbart registers the laugh track as reserve. It keeps alive the possibility of laughing in the future well after one is dead. The laugh track's crime is that it has already condemned a sense of what is present and vital to a past that is preserved for times yet to come. For the creator of *M\*A\*S\*H*, it was not that laughter was inappropriate so much as it was, by an external mediating agent of time, removed from the immediacy of production. Gelbart's assertion represents a valuable instance in which the laugh track is glimpsed as an archivo-mechanical formation. Laughs are temporalized through an immortalizing mechanism. In this respect, we may engage the laugh track for how it is a temporo-quantificatory recipe for making a permanent record. Specifically, it is an always-transforming process in which the laugh-track-producing machine maintains its own uniqueness by actually making laughter, whether grouped or individuated, generic. Considered another way, what the laugh track produces is always the remaking of laughter as reproducible yet again. In short, receiving its authority from precedent and ongoing regimes of imitation, the laugh machine inexhaustibly replicates the already-exhausted in the making of its registry of exhaustion.

### Conclusion: Glimpsing the *an*Archive

I have been arguing for an alternative approach to media that challenges the dismissive but productive conception of the machine, implicit in standard coherentist and/or instrumentalist accounts of media history, as *non-knowledge abyss*. Along these lines, I have greatly benefitted from the materialist approach to media by Wolfgang Ernst. However, as indicated earlier, Ernst is of little help for exploring the laugh track as a paradoxical formation. Thus, to conclude and open up for future discussions, I will provide space to Siegfried Zielinski's (2006) idea of *an*archaeology. Like Ernst, Zielinski rejects the idea that history can be reduced to tidy narratives. As well as Ernst, he develops techniques to describe media formations by their particular materiality as discrete temporal regimes. However, unlike Ernst, Zielinski challenges the authority of the archival record. He is very suspicious of the general frame by which Ernst presumes an *arche* or origin such that the archive is seen as preeminent in prescribing the source of what may come into being as media. If anything, as Zielinski (2006, 258) tells us, media formations, including supportive materials (i.e., documents deemed particular to an invention) as well as archives themselves, are at best indicators of what may not be contained in a record, but still part of the process of invention. For Zielinski, non-realized, non-working media are still, in some fashion, *of* media history and more importantly are *of*, in some way or another, the general processes of making and inventing. In effect, if Ernst would lead us to focus on the operations of the laugh track in terms of quantifiable, future-making auto-generative instances, Zielinski

would get us to reconsider its very form of generativity. Zielinski (2006, 259) thus opens our analytic onto an *un*-economy of inventive forces that expands the study of media beyond measuring how they are generated and generative. This, in turn, radically recasts the abovementioned observation by Parikka as to *how* we are and of media. If anything what we learn is that a technological invention reflects what eludes control and use, including the inventive process itself. Accordingly, we are thus prompted to broaden our understanding of ways to approach media and, by extension, the mechanics of the laugh track archive.

Although I have examined the laugh track as an auto-generative formation the laugh track archive is not to be abstracted from its distinct history and, specifically, its form of preservation. It is not only an always-proliferating storage system of mechanical assemblage. The laugh track would not be the reserve it is, it would not preserve as it does, were it not for Charley Douglass' fanatical secrecy (Pratt 2003, interview). Apart from playing up its mystique as a system of illusion the Laff Box was the broadcast industry's official mechanism that consigned laughter to its institution's confines. In one sense, the Laff Box helped to systematically re-inscribe the value of "spontaneous" visceral response for the broadcast experience. In a more significant sense however, the Laff Box, beyond a preservationist rationale for aiding memory and access to past tracks, kept containment and control of laughs as technically readied for communication. As a system of calculation and accrual, the Laff Box thwarted potential ill-timed, ill-toned, and inappropriate excessive vocalizing. The Laff Box tamed laughter—it was order in a box. Against the threat of perceived unruly audience effusion—presumably an incommunicable *anarchivo-LaffBox*—the Laff Box offered predictability and direction to the broadcast experience. Far from being a binary opposite to media archaeology, Zielinski's (2010, lecture) media *an*archaeology here prompts thinking about what secrets the laugh track archival system might hold. Boiling things down, we may say that the laugh track's potential is always delayed time (the immediacy of laughter is re-stored/held as *a calculus*). It represents, and discretely re-presents as artefact, the potential of the immediate. However, as quantifiable repetitive form the laugh track also unavoidably guts laughter of its guts, its potency. Accordingly, this moment of gutting and cutting (exhibited by the timing element of mechanisms of assemblage) is not just a productive act of the editor. Assemblage and editing also represents what is severed from production. These actions represent the irrevocable delayed force of laughter. In step with Zielinski's analysis, this eviscerated laughter is a secreted element within the laugh machine invention. It is the *an*archive of and within the laugh track archive. To wit, this *other laugh* of the laugh track is a hidden registry that eludes the gaze of the media archaeologist. It cannot be measured as a frequency and as having a temporo-modulated pulse. In a nutshell, the void that *is* and *of* the laugh track archive is a laugh that can never be quantified.

Generally speaking, I have been arguing that media systems carry traits that actually confound their design. Readily identifiable concepts, mechanisms, techniques, and mathematics of invention hold potential for a deviancy from planned outcomes. Within the workings of a system, there are un-specifiable and unproductive elements. For a lot of things, this point appears trivial as long as a system achieves its planned outcome. However, this is in effect how the laugh track is constituted as an archival system. The laugh track is, as system of registry, a formation of confounded planning that has formed through a precedent repetition. To be sure, I am not commenting on the audio technician's poor archival skills. Rather, the laugh track confounds the logic of progression. It is an archival formation that expands its domain of production by already being an artefact of itself, that is, by its having already been spent.[6] Paradoxically, its repetition precedes its formation for being an archive—for what permits the laughter of the laugh track to be repeated.

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## Endnotes

**1**      The Jayo Laugher was put into service in the TV show *I Love Lucy* by legendary producer Jess Oppenheimer. In 1953 Charley Douglass and Oppenheimer were locked in a patent dispute over invention rights for the laugh machine, which Douglass eventually won.

**2**      The Laff Box positioned behind the Jayo Laugher. Article from *Scoop*, http://scoop.diamondgalleries.com/Home/4/1/73/1014?articleID=109948 (accessed February 8, 2018).

**3**      Ironically, the industry *is* the standard-bearer of realism.

**4**      See Wolfgang Ernst's essay "Media Archaeography: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media" (2011) for the idea of the past as form of delayed presence.

**5**       Show number 93, broadcast February 16, 1949. See Lionel Pairpoint's *Bing Crosby's Philco Radio Time* (2000).

**6**      In effect, the laugh track's archivation has already been archived. The laugh track repeats what it does prior to being a system for archiving.