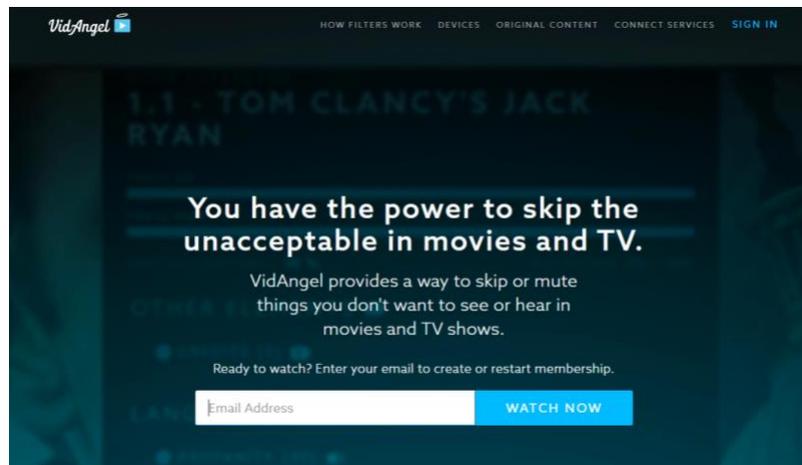


Media Filtering as Religious Worldview

Neal Harmon was raised a devout Latter-day Saint (Mormon) in rural Idaho. Growing up, his family followed church leaders' admonitions to refrain from language degrading to their fellow brothers and sisters, for the scriptures told that words are powerful—the very means by which God created the earth—and that all are children of God. This religious attention to harmful language carried over to the family's media rules, which prohibited R-rated movies entirely and PG-13 movies until the kids turned 17. When the blockbuster film *Titanic* was released in 1997, the Harmons watched it filtered through a TV Guardian, software that would mute swearing and other objectionable content. In this way, Neal was able to participate in popular culture while still maintaining a commitment to his faith.¹ This experience led Neal Harmon to pursue a unique career in media. In 2014, Harmon launched a startup company VidAngel (recently rebranded as Angel Studios), which provided an innovative service to media consumers. For a small subscription fee, users could access the company's patented content filtering system and create a personalized viewing experience by uniquely targeting and eliminating nudity, profanity, and violence from content on streaming platforms.²



[VidAngel Landing Page]

¹ Interview with Neal Harmon, Salt Lake City, UT, March 12, 2020.

² Gavin Feller and Andrew Ventimiglia, "VidAngel: Content filtering technologies, religion, and American copyright law," *Internet Histories* Vol. 5, No. 1 (2021): 8.



[Image from VidAngel Technology Tutorial, Evidence from VidAngel L.L.C. v. Clearplay, Inc. lawsuit]

The development of VidAngel points to an important and underexplored topic related to religion and digital media: religious content moderation. As digital entertainment exponentially increases, religious audiences find themselves in need of means to navigate such content using moral, ethical, and spiritual commitments rather than relying on popular trends and market-driven systems. Emerging content moderation platforms like VidAngel insist that spiritual consumers need not reject secular entertainment entirely but rather filter it in order to produce content suitable for a religious audience. These digital innovators view secular media and culture as containing compelling spiritual perspectives in need of sanitization. That is, that popular Hollywood films and television are brimming with important and meaningful stories that are nevertheless tainted by seemingly unnecessary worldly filth.

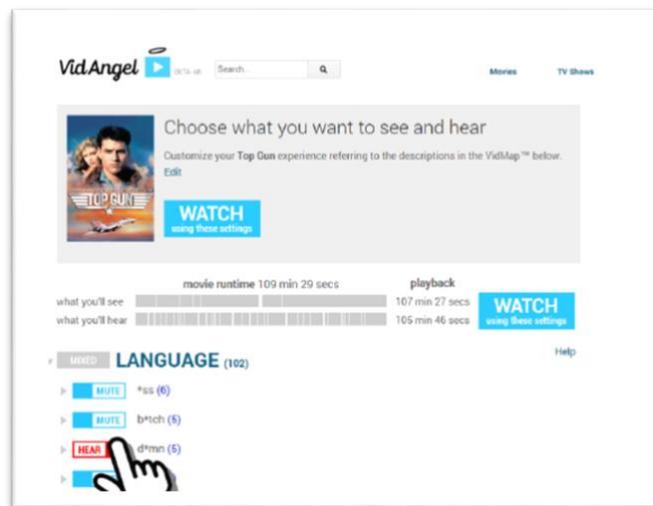
400

Filter Categories	Subcategories
410 vulgarity	"f--" "sh--" "b--"
420 sex/nudity	implicit sex explicit sex female upper frontal nudity female lower frontal nudity male lower frontal nudity male upper frontal nudity
430 violence	kicking/punching swordplay gunplay blood extreme gore mass destruction
440 drama	death horror high-speed action tension yelling
450 alcohol/drugs	drinking alcohol smoking marijuana snorting cocaine needle usage drunkenness being high

Figure 4

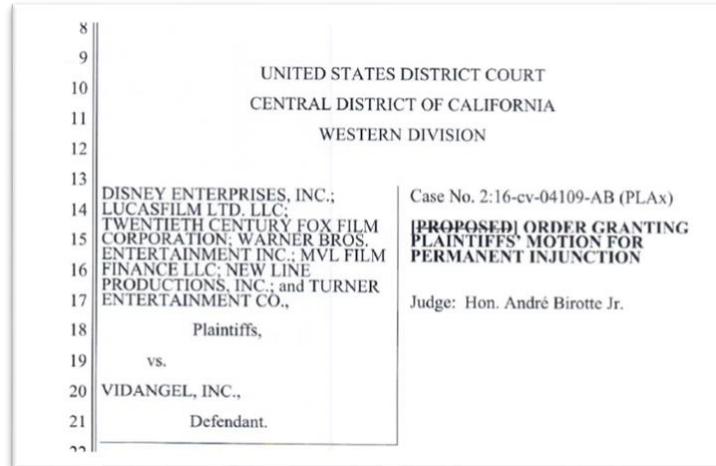
[Image from VidAngel Patent: "Seamless Streaming and Filtering," No. US 9,363,561 B1]

This reconfiguration of the traditional divide between religious and secular media content has powerful implications for lived religion in the United States. Rather than creating siloed religious media worlds—like the Christian Contemporary Music scene, for instance—religious content moderation offers an opportunity for spiritual consumers to engage in popular media without compromising central values—like picking the pineapple off of an otherwise delicious pizza. In this respect, we might consider media consumption itself a form of spiritual practice and the performance of media literacy in popular culture—a willingness and ability to share the same references and cultural touchstones as their secular peers—an important prerogative for contemporary spiritual consumers. In other words, one’s media choices are inherently part of a lifelong commitment to “be in the world but not of the world.”



[Image of VidAngel Interface from VidAngel Technology Tutorial, Evidence from VidAngel LLC v. Clearplay, Inc. lawsuit]

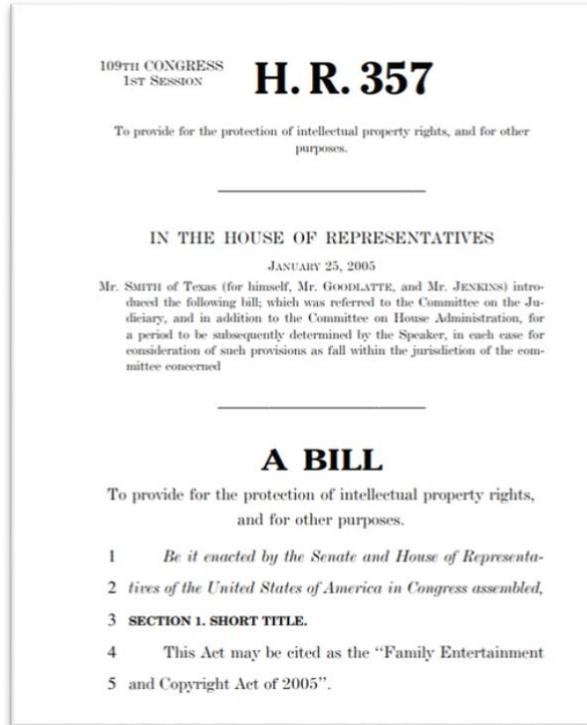
While VidAngel and related companies like ClearPlay and TV Guardian found success satisfying a unique market need—VidAngel in particular managed to enroll 100,000 monthly users by 2016 and then expanded to become creators of successful original content including ‘Dry Bar Comedy’ and *The Chosen* TV series—these companies’ religiously-motivated filtering technologies also faced unique legal challenges. Not long after gaining traction through viral marketing videos, VidAngel was sued by a group of Hollywood directors and studios. Embedded in the question of whether VidAngel’s filtering service is legal is a complex tension between religious practice, copyright law, and consumer rights. Should there be a legally recognized religious right to filter? How should the law balance the rights of families to control their media consumption, on the one hand, and the commercial and artistic rights of major film directors and studios on the other?



[Order Granting Injunction against VidAngel for Copyright Infringement in *Disney v. VidAngel*]

The research supported by the Lived Religion in the Digital Age Fellowship explored these questions and established a framework for further exploration of this topic. To begin, we analyzed the complex and intertwined relationship between religion, filtering, and copyright law in an article published in *Internet Histories* in Spring 2021. Our research uncovered something unexpected: the notion that one could obtain a unique right to filter content for various religious, moral, or ethical reasons. Understanding this filtering right required a deeper dive into the legal history of copyright that we only briefly summarize here.

The right to filter content was codified in the Family Movie Act of 2005, a law permitting the filtering of copyrighted works, so long as the filtering method is done so privately and *does not make an unauthorized copy of the work in the process*. During its legal fight, VidAngel attempted to use the law to deny copyright infringement, arguing that its filtering service did not create a copy. Instead, it used sophisticated technology to remove undesired portions of a film *in real time* according to a viewer's preferences. Unfortunately for VidAngel, the defense failed and the judge ruled in favor of the Hollywood titans. Why? Because VidAngel did not have permission to create a master copy of the film in the first place—the main digital file used to stream filtered versions for subscribers was illegally ripped from a legally purchased DVD.



[Bill H.R. 357 “Family Entertainment and Copyright Act of 2005]

Our research connected these legal nuances—and VidAngel’s defense in particular—to their underlying religious motivations and neoliberal consumer assumptions. In court, VidAngel combined appeals to religious and family values with consumer and privacy rights, arguing for what we call “family media rights.” The notion of family media rights is a new theory we put forth to describe the logic of VidAngel’s (and its predecessor’s) legal defense, namely a family’s right to modify copyrighted commercial content in the private setting of a home—as personal morals dictate and as legal consumer purchase allows. In other words, once someone pays for a popular film, they have the right to remove parts that offend them so long as they do so privately and do not share their filtered version. These are, according to the logic, a family’s legal rights granted to them 1) as consumers of a product, 2) as individuals with moral and religious commitments, and 3) as citizens with the expectation of personal freedom and privacy. Of course, versions of these rights—whether implicit or explicit—exist in different contexts. What is particularly novel about the notion of family media rights is the use of the term “family” as a seemingly coherent and singular unit (e.g., what about different individual children’s rights within the family?) that appeals to broader American cultural values in which religion is central, and its application to media consumption choices specifically (e.g., ‘If I have the right to buy a pair of jeans from the store and then cut them into shorts when I get home, do I not then have the right to cut a sex scene out of a film that I’ve paid to watch at home with my kids?’).

As we concluded our article, “The solution for navigating potentially immoral media systems did not involve opting out of popular content and popular media altogether...Rather, it involved committing to the religio-legal right to transform content through the identification and removal

of morally offensive portions: a practice grounded in a combination of technological, legal, and political action.”³ Though VidAngel’s legal defense failed, the notion of family media rights will likely continue to gain traction in popular culture, particularly as it relates to ongoing developments at the intersection of social media, content moderation, and free speech—a constellation of forces closely tied to various articulations of religious values.

In addition to this article, we continue to develop other aspects of this research designed to make sense of the role that content filtering plays in religious media consumption. First, we are creating a documentary video about this subject that includes original interviews with key figures in the world of content moderation including Neal and Jordan Harmon of VidAngel and Matt Jarman of ClearPlay, another filtering company with Latter-day Saint roots that has successfully avoided legal trouble. Second, we plan to conduct interviews and focus groups with users of these content filtering services to better understand how media filtering technologies play an important role in the lives of religious consumers. This subsequent research will result in another publication that further interrogates media filtering as a substantiation of religious worldview. We hope that these future projects will contribute to research on religion and digital media by exploring how emerging technologies are appropriated, negotiated, and adapted by religious communities.

³ Feller and Ventimiglia, “VidAngel,” 25-26.