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Christian parents find sanctuary in – surprise – the new technology

By Ellen Barry
THE BOSTON GLOBE

These days, families have access to religious Internet providers, Christian-centered sports journalism, Christian-only direct satellite broadcast and Christian combat computer-action games.

WATERVILLE, Maine — Taki Pilitsis is knee deep in media. While his mother checks financial markets on her laptop across the room, he sits in front of a personal computer, legs poking out of cavernous shorts, pounding keys that control a prowling warrior. His bedroom is papered with posters of athletes captured in midair, sweat flying. Although he has spent most of his life in central Maine, he has a favorite rapper.

But look closely, and note that he is shooting his way through the "mall of worldliness" in "Saints of Virtue," and defending himself with exploding Bible verses, the lyrics he sings could be mistaken for hip-hop romance but actually refer to Jesus. And at 12, Taki has only dim impressions of the Backstreet Boys, Pokémon, Doom or Snoop Dogg.

At an age when boys turn eagerly to popular culture, he lives in a media world carefully built by his mother, Allison Pilitsis, who became a born-again Christian eight years ago after a long conversation with a Baptist manicurist.

Conservative Christians like Pilitsis have long been able to turn to "The 700 Club" for Pat Robertson's take on the news, but in recent years, technology and investment have pushed this niche market into overdrive.

Increasingly, they have the option not only of supplementing secular media but of replacing it — with religious Internet service providers and religious long-distance carriers, Christian-centered sports journalism, Bible-based financial advice, Christian-only direct satellite broadcast and Christian combat computer-action games.

All of which allows Pilitsis to remove her children from the influence of most popular culture without making them feel cut off.

"They're doing all the things that other kids are doing, but they're doing them in their own realm," said Pilitsis, 49, who attends the Faith Evangelical Free Church in Oakland, Maine. "So I don't think they're missing out."

When talking about the technology that makes it possible to raise faithful children in a secular world, Pilitsis closes her eyes in gratitude.

Other parents interviewed — united by the fear that younger and younger children are buffeted with images of violence and sex — spoke with optimism about the loosening grip of network news and the daily paper.

Scott Somerville, an attorney with the Virginia-based Home School Legal Defense Association, said that he can now look into the future and envision the development of a rich Christian "countermedia" — a "ghetto" in the best sense of the term, giving communities the ability to preserve their faith in the face of "a hostile dominant culture."

Yet many others look warily at this development, arguing that Christ called his followers to work in the world, not run from it.

"I think it's getting to the point where technology will allow you to create a bubble around yourself so you don't need to interact with the outside world, the 'fallen world,'" said Greg Boyd, a professor of theology at Bethel College and pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minn.

"You develop a whole culture of people who are completely incapable of holding a conversation with someone who doesn't hold their world view."

Marketers are hoping to bridge that gap with products that can compete with mainstream offerings. Taki and his 9-year-old brother, Alex, are the kinds of customers that Theo Beale, 31, was thinking of when his company, Eternal Warriors, unveiled "The War in Heaven," a Christian-themed, 3-D combat, action-video game that pits zaftig blond angels against demons with clubs and cloven hoofs.

Beale intentionally designed the game to satisfy teen-age players of "first-person shooters" like "Doom" and "Quake." And Boyd, who has test-marketed "The War in Heaven" with his 14-year-old son, said Beale's game is a vast improvement on more conservative Christian computer games, such as one whose goal was fitting as many animals as possible on Noah's Ark.

The flip side is that "The War in Heaven," with its vivid, rapid-fire, hand-to-hand combat, is violent. But Beale says Christian publishers cannot ignore popular culture.

"If you want to reach people, you have to speak the Gospel to them in their language," he said.

For Beale, who also writes Christian fantasy novels, recent developments have expanded the market into a playground of opportunity.

Part of this expansion is pure capitalism — as a niche market, the country's 80 million active, churchgoing Christians are increasingly hard to ignore. The average children's department in a Christian retail store last year grew by 22 percent, according to the Christian Booksellers' Association, and Christian-themed fiction is the fastest-growing genre in publishing, according to Salem Communications.

There are also plenty of crossover hits for adults — the "Assassins" has spent four months on the New York Times' best-seller list; Hollywood was shocked when the film "The Omega Code" was lofted by church-centered promotion into the 10 top-grossing films; and the Christian-influenced rock band Creed made it to No. 3 on the Billboard alternative singles chart in November.

Meanwhile, technology has made publishing far easier.

"If I had wanted to print a book up 10 years ago, I could have spent my life savings and made a crappy little vanity press thing," said Beale, in a telephone interview from his home in Switzerland.

Now "for three or four bucks a copy, I can produce a nice-looking paperback that is every bit as good as the national media can do. … The giants can no longer control what other people are printing."

Nor, anymore, can they control what people are reading.

Allison Pilitsis, who left town in 1972 riding high as a former Miss Waterville, returned 23 years later, newly divorced and with two young children. After working overseas for most of that time as a travel executive, she returned to a United States that shocked her with its sloppy dress, contempt for authority, and embrace of premarital sex and gay rights.

Raised on network news, she began to question the objectivity of mainstream media. Then she gave up on it.

"I've seen it, and I can't get away from it. So I'm just going to do without it," she said.

Decisions about the media are a central battleground for many conservative Christian parents, said others interviewed.

Susan Blake of Brewer said her 11-year-old son relies heavily on reruns of "The Waltons" and "My Three Sons"; Calvin Lawson of the Cherry Valley neighborhood in Leicester, Mass., makes sure his children can balance the "secular news" with the conservative reporting of WorldNetDaily.

Most parents agreed that the battle grows harder with age. Eric Unsworth, a Hamilton, Mass., father, said as his children grew into teen-agers, separating them from the "cultural smog" proved "less doable than we hoped," giving rise to case-by-case negotiation about music and movies.

But so far, Pilitsis has succeeded in what she set out to do. A year ago, she canceled her subscription to the Waterville Morning Sentinel because she did not want her children to read coverage of the Monica Lewinsky scandal.

She is boycotting Disney, and has soured on the Public Broadcasting System, whose approach to religion strikes her as scholarly, rather than faith-based, and put a block on Nickelodeon, which she criticizes as "very evolution-oriented."

Apart from Investors' Business Daily — which she needs for her online trading — Newsweek and two children's sports publications, Pilitsis' subscriptions are explicitly Christian.

On her wish list is Sky Angel, a satellite broadcasting package that will allow her to receive 24 Christian channels, bypassing all other channels, and that, its advertisement promises, "cannot be interrupted or influenced by secular media 'gatekeepers.'"

There is little longing for forbidden media in the Pilitsis household — in large part, Pilitsis said, because her sons are rarely exposed to it and "there's not a lot of discretionary time for them to be where I can't see them."

For the last three years, she has floated the idea of home-schooling them, but they have resisted the idea, she said. As it is, they go to a Christian school, attend a Christian youth group, play in a Christian basketball league, and the only time they spend with children outside their faith is when they play with their cousins in a local soccer league. She has heard secular radio stations playing upstairs but only a couple of times.

"It's not easy for kids to be able to stand up for what they know is right when they've got kids around them that might ridicule them," she said. "It's a battle for the kids, no matter what we do at home."

To those who see an answer in a Christian "countermedia," it is less a new world than a re-creation of an old world — one that is irretrievably lost.

"As recently as 1962, a child would go to school and read the King James Bible, say grace before dinner and then watch 'Father Knows Best,' and everyone went to Sunday school," said Somerville.

"We've shifted from a society that enforced generic Protestant norms to, in the last 20 years, a kind of multicultural idea. So what if the Protestant minority decides to create its own counterculture?"

Pilitsis says her battle to protect her family has mostly been a winning one. But in the back of her mind is the worry that the same technology that makes her all-Christian-all-the-time household possible also poses a danger.

A few weeks ago Taki, on the brink of becoming a teen-ager, asked to be allowed to watch the latest James Bond film and was denied.

"I just kind of got over it," he said, but the next dilemma is already lined up: He wants his own e-mail account with his own password.

Pilitsis sighs, looking slightly exhausted. She has passed on Taki's request to her pastor, and she is waiting for him to call back.

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