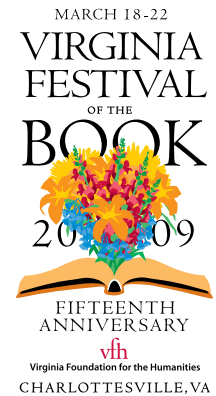


## *Amusing Ourselves to Death* by Neil Postman recommended by Stephen J. Farnsworth

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Stephen J. Farnsworth—asst. professor of communications at George Mason University and author of *Spinner in Chief: How Presidents Sell Their Policies and Themselves*—recommends *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman. We hope that you will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Once again, presidential politics has entered the silly season. After Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) used an image of Paris Hilton in a campaign advertisement mocking rival Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) for his alleged celebrity status, Hilton fired back with a crafty ad where the swimsuit-clad heiress expounded on her energy plan. It was the story of the week.

Hilton's public policy ad was catnip for the many reporters and news consumers who would much rather talk about a young blonde model poolside than agonize over U.S. energy policies. When famous oilman T. Boone Pickens bought some ads to promote wind power, the media yawned.

Perhaps the octogenarian should have worn a swimsuit.

For many citizens, the trivial nature of mediated presidential campaigns has become commonplace and therefore escapes notice. Even experienced voters may find it hard to remember when political campaigns were about more than which candidate looked more genuine in a duck blind or riding a tank or clearing brush on the ranch. Yes, once upon a time presidential campaigns did not turn on which candidate seemed least trustworthy under the glare of television lights, or who delivered the funnier retort in a presidential debate.

In order to see the mass media forest for what it is, every year I have my students read *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* by Neil Postman,

who was a leading critic of the mass media before his death a few years ago. I first read this book as a teaching assistant in graduate school, and still consider it one of the most fascinating (dare I say entertaining?) studies of how television undermines intelligent discourse about everything, especially politics.

It is hard to perceive what is ubiquitous. Even politicians, who have the most to lose by the largely trivial approach to news, have internalized television's definition of news. Those media norms push citizens, politicians and reporters all in the direction of shallow news that is more about entertaining than informing. Postman argued in this book that the prophecy of *Brave New World* has come to pass. We love the culture that debases us.

Fundamentally, Postman argued that a print newspaper, the cold logic of the typed word, is the best mechanism for conveying important information about candidates and elections. Television and other visual media are more inclined to make us feel, rather than think. Since feeling is easier than thinking, and perhaps more satisfying psychologically, we turn away from the more informative information source.

Postman's book leaves readers with a central irony. Even the dissemination of his message depends, to a significant degree, on its entertainment value. Students always say his rants against the evils of television were quite entertaining.