The December 1964 issue of Educational Perspectives carried a brief article by me entitled "NET: National Educational Television." At that time Hawaii's two non-commercial educational stations had not yet been activated, and so I sought to explain the objectives and program philosophy of NET and the concept of what has since come to be known as "public television." Now, four years later, Hawaii has a thriving ETV system that, I am told, is capable of reaching about 90 per cent of the state's residents. KHET, Honolulu, and KMEB, Wailuku, and the several translators in the system, have already made a considerable contribution to the in-class education of young people and they have also brought into the homes of their viewers many hours of the NET programming that I had described.

This somewhat longer article will discuss the future development of public television programming. It will make some attempt to visualize the kinds of programs that a person might expect to see when he tunes his set to a non-commercial channel in the latter decades of this twentieth century. But first, a question: What is the job of public television? This is a large question and it should get a large answer. What, for that matter, is the job of commercial television? Most commercial broadcasters would be indignant, and rightly so, if one said merely that the job of commercial television is to entertain viewers and thereby sell the sponsors' products and thereby make money for the networks' and the stations' stockholders. That ignores the whole area of news and information and public affairs. It also ignores the many pioneering efforts in other areas of programming, and it minimizes the work of a great number of talented and dedicated people. Furthermore, it takes a rather patronizing attitude toward entertainment. To provide good entertainment is no small thing, and entertainment itself is not an unimportant thing.

The point I am making, of course, is that there is no simple answer to either of those two questions. But to put it simply, for the sake of our discussion here, the job of public television is to take up where commercial television has to leave off. It is public television's responsibility to do — and do well — the kind of programming that we all know should be done, but that commercial television, for various reasons, can't do, or can't do enough of, or can't offer to the public at a time convenient to most viewers. Obviously, public

Public Television and Tomorrow's World

John F. White
television is not going to try to compete for audiences in the way that NBC competes with CBS. For public television the size of the audience must never be an end in itself. But the size of our audience does become one measure of our effectiveness. Therefore we do, after all, compete for viewers. We also compete for ideas, for talent — in short, for program quality — because another measure of our effectiveness, a more basic one, is what the program does to the viewer. Does it challenge him? Does it involve him? Does it make a difference? If it doesn't make a difference, then it has failed utterly, even if it happens to have outdrawn "Gomer Pyle" or "Thursday Night at the Movies."

I am, incidentally, one of those who believe that public television and commercial television will live together for a long time — not happily ever after, perhaps, but in reasonable harmony, and with a growing awareness that neither can do the whole job, that each needs the other, and that our society — with its urgent and complex problems that cry out for an informed, alert public — needs both of them.

Now to the central topic and thus to another question: What kind of programming should and will public television offer to the American people in, let us say, the next twenty-five to thirty years? Obviously, this will depend to a large extent on the source and size of its basic financial support, and crucial to that are the decisions yet to be made by Congress on the long-range funding of the new Corporation for Public Broadcasting and its insulation from political pressures. But let us assume an independent public television system (no other kind is worth talking about anyway), with budgets that are still modest but considerably larger than those of non-commercial television today.

Obviously also, technological advances will help to determine the kind of programming that will be done — developments like communications satellites, light-weight cameras, devices in the home receiver to record programs and play them back, even advances in color and sound. Another factor will be the activation of many more UHF channels. There is, even today, a trend toward specialization among both commercial and non-commercial stations — somewhat on the pattern of radio with its news stations and music stations — and this will accelerate. As a consequence, there will be much more programming for special interest groups, particularly at the local and regional levels.

Right now at NET we devote about half of our program units to public affairs programming — that is, to programs on domestic and international problems and issues. The remaining units are given over to drama, music, dance, and the various other arts, to programs in the humanities and sciences, and to children's programs. Whether or not this ratio will hold in the decades ahead, we at NET — and the individual stations too — will continue to give priority to public affairs, and with the development of light-weight equipment and communication satellites, there will be an increasing emphasis on events. Hardly any place on earth will be out of the camera's range, and live programming from around the world will become routine — hopefully, live programming from nations like the Soviet Union and countries even less accessible to us now. I suspect that Congress itself will eventually become convinced that television coverage of its sessions is in fact in the best interests of the American people.

Mere exposure to events and to places and people will sometimes prove to be almost an education in itself, but television can and should provide much more. Public television, in particular has the responsibility to give meaning to these events, to probe and explain them. We will see in the next twenty-five to thirty years, I think, considerable programming like the kind that NET built around the President's State of the Union messages of January 1967 and 1968. These, of course, were live programs, sent across the country to our network of affiliated stations. In both years we took a half hour before the speech itself to put the event into historical perspective and to depict the mood of the nation as it awaited the President's address. Then, with the commercial networks, we covered the speech itself. Afterwards, we turned the program over to our far-flung panel of experts, almost a dozen of them each year, for a freewheeling, open-ended discussion of what had been said and what had not been said, and why, and what this portended. These were distinguished political scientists, economists, historians, journalists, authorities on government, authorities on urban affairs — some liberal, some conservative, some middle-of-the-road. They were located, singly or in groups of two or three, in five or six studios around the country, and our moderator in New York served as the referee. Both years, incidentally, the critics called it good, exciting television, and it had to be good, exciting television, for if it hadn't been — if it hadn't kept the viewers sitting there in front of their sets — whatever else it might have been wouldn't have mattered.

These two programs, I think, were the
precursors of a great many live, interpretive programs that will be built around events. But not all public affairs programs — not anywhere near all — will be either live or built around events. There will still be a place for many of the taped and filmed programs we do today. The filmed documentary will certainly be with us, and it will grow progressively more effective with sharpened techniques and advances in technology. Undoubtedly, also, new program forms will be developed, some combining elements of existing forms.

Perhaps by describing briefly four recent and very distinctive NET programs, I can give you some idea of the kind of public affairs programming I think we can expect to see. Each of these programs, by the way, was presented on the NET Network within the last eighteen months.

One of the four is “Our World,” which did indeed make history as the first around-the-world live television program. Broadcasters from fourteen nations produced this two-hour telecast, and viewers on five continents saw it simultaneously. NET, the only U. S. participant, contributed several segments. The content ranged from the trivial to the sublime — from the movement of Sunday evening highway traffic somewhere in Europe to the birth of a baby somewhere in Mexico. “Our World” was frankly an experiment, and it had its rough edges, but it was also a successful television program. What it did was to evoke a kind of wonder, as its cameras — moving from night in Paris to early afternoon in San Francisco, from winter in Australia to summer in New York — caught the world in its many moods and strikingly depicted both the diversity and the oneness of man. There will be many more programs like this.

The second of the four programs is “Midsummer 1967” in our Monday evening “NET Journal” series. This was a special two-hour report on the 1967 riots in Newark, New Jersey, and other American cities. The first ninety minutes were given over to a dialogue between Negro spokesmen and white community leaders in Newark, organized by NET just after the riots there. Attending the Newark meeting were 20 panelists and an audience of some 200 local residents, many of whom took part in the candid, often heated exchanges on such subjects as police brutality, housing, education, unemployment, and racial attitudes. The last half-hour of the program was devoted to an interpretive discussion of the Newark meeting, and of the wave of summer riots, by a panel of experts on human relations and urban affairs. The discussion was taped in Washington, D. C., one week after the Newark meeting. “Midsummer 1967” was the first national television program to bring Negro grievances into the open in this fashion; it was the first to set up a Negro-White confrontation. The program received good reviews, but much more important, we think it gave to its viewers a considerably deeper appreciation of the intensity, complexity, and urgency of this whole problem.

The third of the four programs is one entitled “The People Question Vice-President Humphrey.” In this live one-hour special — which, incidentally, was produced and presented several months before President Johnson announced that he would not be a candidate in the fall of 1968 — the Vice-President answered questions from groups of citizens across the country, questions that neither Mr. Humphrey nor NET saw beforehand. Participating were members of the League of Women Voters in Philadelphia, members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce in Athens, Georgia, students at the University of Wisconsin’s Milwaukee campus, and members of a Los Angeles local of the United Auto Workers. These people were located in studios in their home communities, while Mr. Humphrey was with moderator Paul Niven in Washington. The 66 questioners represented almost every shade of American political opinion. Actually, they were selected not by NET but by the organizations themselves. The objective of this program, of course, was to create a dialogue between government at the top level and the so-called “grass roots” America. The program did have its problems, but we also learned a great deal about what we can and cannot do in this format, and we expect to arrange many more such question-and-answer sessions with high government officials.

The fourth program is one entitled “Where Is Prejudice?” Also a part of our Monday evening “NET Journal” series. “Where Is Prejudice?” developed from an experiment in group dynamics conducted by NET during the summer of 1967. The experiment brought together twelve reputedly unbiased college students of different faiths and races for a week-long workshop at Gloucester Harbor, Massachusetts. The group was headed by Dr. Max Birnbaum of Boston University. NET sound equipment and cameras were also there, recording the sessions and following the students to the lawn, the beach, and the barbecue pit. As the week passed, latent prejudices began to show, at first subtly, then openly. In the end there were angry confrontations and honest admissions of bias by young people supposedly free of such feelings. The program itself condenses all this into
one dramatic hour. It was not meant to be a pretty program, and it isn’t. It is a disturbing program, for it shows the viewer a part of himself that he would prefer not to see. But it is also an exceptionally valuable program, because it brings unprecedented candor to this very large and very human problem of prejudice.

The four programs I have just described have one thing in common. They are imaginative and resourceful; they are new approaches in a program area that constantly calls for new approaches. They display, I think, the kind of imagination and resourcefulness, and the kind of courage, that you can come to expect from public television in its treatment of domestic and international issues.

Cultural programming also will be affected by technological advances. Here too we will see an increasing emphasis on events — for instance, we can anticipate live coverage of music festivals and outstanding stage productions — though the emphasis will be not nearly so great as in public affairs. Perhaps in the cultural area, the one most significant technical development will be that of the device in the home receiver to record programs and play them back. Eventually there will be shelves of television programs in our living rooms, as there now are shelves of books and records, and people will be going to public libraries to take out programs they don’t happen to have at home. You can imagine what this will mean to televised drama and music — in fact, to television performance in almost any of the arts.

At NET we have high ambitions for our weekly drama series, "NET Playhouse." This series has already come up with some remarkable original productions, and it has presented some excellent dramas that we acquired overseas, but it has also been severely limited by a lack of adequate funds. We hope and expect that tomorrow the money will be there — enough money to enable us to purchase the rights to contemporary dramatic significance, to give exposure to gifted but relatively unknown authors and actors and directors, to seek out new talents and new ideas, not just in New York and Hollywood, but wherever they exist. We are not, however, just sitting back and waiting for tomorrow. We have now undertaken a new American Regional Theater Television Project and have received support for it from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. As a beginning, we plan to do four dramas with some of the best regional theater companies in the nation and two documentaries on the regional theater across the country. The documentaries will focus on how regional theater companies work, on how they manage to keep going, and on the impact they have on their own communities. The development of regional theater companies is one of the cultural phenomena of our age, and these groups should and will have an important place in television drama.

We also have underway a study of the role that NET and all of public television can play in televised opera, dance, and symphonic and chamber music. This study is being directed for us by Dr. Peter Herman Adler, musical director of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The basic objective is to find ways in which the arts of music and television can be wedded for the benefit of the viewing public. Until this project is completed, we cannot very accurately predict what public TV will offer in the field of music during the next two or three decades, but the study itself is assurance that we at NET hope to do some exciting things with music and television.

Certainly we plan to continue our series of specials done in cooperation with New York City’s Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. These specials involve all of the performing arts, and original works are commissioned for them through the Lincoln Center Fund. We hope, in fact, to do considerably more programming of this type — that is, the performance of original works created especially for television.

Aside from superior performance programs, what should public television give to the audiences of tomorrow in the cultural area? Let me cite a program presented recently by one of the commercial networks, NBC’s "Bell Telephone Hour" with George Plimpton and the New York Philharmonic. Mr. Plimpton, you’ll remember, is the gentleman who tried his hand as a quarterback for the Detroit Lions during pre-season training and then wrote about it in the book The Paper Lion. During the course of this program he played several instruments with the New York Philharmonic, and when the program was over, not only George Plimpton but also the audience had at least some idea of what it takes to play in a symphony orchestra, of how an orchestra like this is put together, and of how it works. Not long ago NET did a program with much the same objective. This one had Erich Leinsdorf, music director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, rehearsing the young members of the New England Conservatory Orchestra and discussing with them the demands of the music on which they were working.

These two programs, though largely successful, were perhaps not great television, but they did
begin to do a big job that must be done. And that job is to give to the American people a clearer understanding of the various arts — painting, sculpture, poetry, drama, music, dance — so that they will be more at home with the arts and less in awe of them; so that they will avoid that false worship of the arts that results in a wrong emphasis and is, in itself, an obstacle to real appreciation and enjoyment.

In the next twenty-five to thirty years, public television should and will become a national platform for the arts. It seems incredible in this age of communications, but it is true that today only a small segment of the American public is reached by even our greatest composers, dramatists, choreographers, singers, actors, dancers, poets, and sculptors. Certainly as a nation we suffer for this. What we in public television must do is to involve the artist in television. We must not only bring him into the medium but also convince him that television is worth his energy and time, and worth his best effort. We must convince him — no, we must prove to him through the programming we produce with him — that this involvement is vital to him as an artist and to us, his audience, as a people.

Public television also has a heavy responsibility in the children’s program area. Currently NET offers three continuing series for children, one for youngsters from eight on, up, to two others for boys and girls under that age. In addition, most of the nearly 150 affiliated stations in the NET Network broadcast children’s programs that are produced locally. Because funds for children’s programming have been scarce, it has taken us a long while to build to this, and even so we are now meeting only a small portion of the needs in this important area. But there is ferment here. Exciting things began to happen last spring with the creation of the Children’s Television Workshop of NET.

This is an experiment aimed at pre-school children across the country. The idea is to stimulate the intellectual and cultural growth of four- and five-year-olds—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds — through imaginative programming that has a strong appeal to these youngsters. The Workshop, which goes on the air in the fall of 1969, is being funded initially by the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, the U. S. Office of Education, and several other federal agencies. The eventual cost is expected to be from six to eight million dollars. These will be hour-long programs in color and they will be broadcast daily (perhaps both in the morning and afternoon) five days a week for twenty-six weeks on the NET Network. There will be considerable advance preparation and testing before the first program goes across the country, and the television professionals on the Workshop staff will work closely with educators, psychologists, and other specialists in child development in the attempt to fuse education and entertainment. The key to success here, of course, is to make the boys and girls really want to watch, and everyone connected with the Workshop knows this.

The outcome of this experiment will unquestionably do much to determine the nature and scope of other ambitious ventures in children’s programming during the next three decades.

Before I leave this area I would like to mention briefly one probable NET project of the future that would involve both our children and our public affairs program staffs. Eventually, we hope to do a daily news show for children, to be presented during school hours and to be used, if the schools so choose, in conjunction with one or more courses. Ideally there would be three such broadcasts: one for elementary school children, one for children in junior high school, and one for senior high school students. If they are to succeed, these programs will have to be as interesting to the children as they are informative. Assuming that they do engage the minds of the young people, we think there is no better way to build an informed and active citizenry for the world of tomorrow.

I have not attempted here to be all-inclusive. For instance, I have said nothing of our activities in the humanities or the sciences, though we will continue to do considerable programming in each of these fields. I hope, however, that I have managed to give some idea of what public television expects to offer in the years ahead.

I am sometimes asked if there is any one programming accomplishment that I personally would like to achieve before I retire. My answer is that I could not possibly select one project from among all of them. There are just too many that seem to me to be the “most important.” What I want to see above all (and I am confident that I speak here also for my colleagues in non-commercial broadcasting) is an established public television system, adequately financed at all levels, independent of political pressures, and offering to the American people a broad and diverse program service of superior quality — that is, a program service of substance and excitement, equal to the dream that television inspired in its earliest years, and equal to the demands of tomorrow’s world.
Mr. Tomoji Urakawa, science program producer for NHK since 1961, assists primary students to construct a simple experiment described on the popular program "NHK Science Classroom."

Kindergarten children viewing a color instructional broadcast.