Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP (Mackellar) (10:40): On behalf of the Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts I present the committee’s report entitled Arts and the news to rural and regional Australia together with the minutes of proceedings.

Report made a parliamentary paper in accordance with standing order 39(e).

Mrs BRONWYN BISHOP; by leave—Rural and regional Australians deserve access to high-quality arts performances and reliable news services. This inquiry has been a timely and productive examination of how well rural and regional communities are currently served in these two distinct, but important, areas.

The live performance industry in Australia each year reaches millions of people, enriching their lives and providing a host of community and health benefits, as well as contributing millions of dollars to the economy. In 2012, the live performance industry generated $2.546 million (value adding $1.529 million to the Australian economy) and employed over 18,000 people.

As a group, Australia’s major performing arts companies reached 16 million people in 2014-15, through live arts performances and broadcasts or recordings of their own work. In 2015, the major performing arts companies delivered live arts performances and arts programs to close to four million people in metropolitan and regional areas.

Major performing arts companies like Opera Australia and The Australian Ballet bring excellence to the one-third of Australians who live in rural and regional communities. Opera Australia, as Australia’s national opera company, presents more than 700 performances each year, reaching more than half a million people. Since 1996 it has toured to 110 different venues, presented 549 high-quality performances and travelled more than 280,000 kilometres around the country. The Australian Ballet delivers 200 performances in cities and regional areas across Australia each year, reaching over 10,000 people in regional communities.

The performances and interactive programs delivered by these groups are highly valued by these communities, and often have a profound impact on audiences and participants. They can also be an important source of inspiration for, and have a long-lasting impact on, students and local professionals. These groups, and the other performing arts companies, play a crucial role in shaping and reflecting Australia’s cultural identity.

In 2014 there were over 18.5 million tickets for attendances at live arts performances, exceeding the football sporting code attendances of over 13.7 million that year. This was a 3.4 per cent increase on 2013 attendances at live arts performances. In Australia, which prides itself on being a sporting nation, the ticket numbers for attendances for live arts performances reflect that the arts are most highly valued.

Touring is one of the key ways in which people in rural and regional communities can access quality live performances without having to visit a capital city or larger metropolitan area. Regional touring is generally undertaken by Australia’s major performing arts companies and some small to medium arts groups, and is usually subsidised to some degree by the company itself. These touring and regional engagement activities also typically receive government funding support. The performing arts groups do an outstanding job in delivering tours and regional engagement activities to rural and regional communities. There is wide demand for these shows and engagement, and they are highly valued by people in these communities. Australia’s major performing arts companies recognise the importance of enabling everyone, regardless of how far they may live from a major metropolitan centre, access to the very best Australia has to offer.

While regional tours often run at a loss, with groups regularly subsidising their touring activities, they tend to regard it as an ‘investment’, rather than a loss. Governments must see its funding for these tours and activities in a similar light.
The committee's nine recommendations relating to the arts are aimed at helping to ensure that the excellent work already being done continues and, where possible, is further enhanced. The committee accordingly recommends: the continuation of funding for Australia's major performing arts companies; the government take into account the dynamic and changing nature of the arts in grants programs, including acknowledging the dynamic nature of the major performing arts companies, like Opera Australia, which sees its repertoire as evolving, for example, to include amplified performances and musicals, and challenges the definition of opera so it is not stuck in a 19th century form of opera that makes it part of the past rather than part of the future; the government, when assessing the effectiveness of its funding, encourage the educative role that performing arts companies play—for example, the Australian Ballet, which brings professional excellence to these communities in its performances, and through its interactions with schools has reached thousands of teachers and students; maintaining adequate funding for the Australia Council for the Playing Australia program; national touring status arrangements are retained and extended to additional performing arts companies; the Australia Council explore ways to encourage and formalise mentoring arrangements between performing arts companies and rural and regional communities; the new Catalyst Australian Arts and Culture Fund be evaluated, and this be reported on the department's website to heighten awareness of the program; the government consider funding and support for digital innovation in the delivery of the arts; and the eligibility for the Catalyst Australian Arts and Culture Fund includes competitions and eisteddfods.

Commercial, public and community broadcasters play important roles in providing news services to people in rural and regional Australia. The ability to access diverse local content, including news and emergency information, is vitally important to Australians living outside of the major metropolitan centres. People in these communities should have equitable access to fast and reliable broadband and related services. The government needs to take the necessary actions to help ensure that rural and regional communities continue to receive reliable and quality news services, including locally relevant content.

The committee makes seven recommendations aimed at providing the necessary support for regional services in the changing media landscape. Accordingly, the committee recommends: reducing broadcast licence fees for free-to-air and community broadcasters; the need for the government to take into account the implications of any reforms to media ownership on broadcasting and news services to rural and regional Australia; reviewing the existing broadcast licencing system to consider the adequacy of the concept of 'local' and the provision of incentives for broadcasters who deliver more targeted local content to rural and regional audiences; ensuring that the ABC board is more representative of the Australian community, including rural and regional communities and ensure two members are from rural and regional Australia; changes to the ABC Code of Practice to include a requirement that any correction or clarification must be made on the relevant program in which the error was made, in addition to being published on the ABC website; developing a level playing field for public, commercial and community broadcasters in adhering to standards for broadcasting; developing a framework to enhance the accuracy and accountability of the ABC; and the SBS and ABC remaining as separate entities.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the organisations and individuals that assisted the committee during the inquiry through submissions and giving evidence at public hearings. I also thank my colleagues, the deputy chair, Mr Tim Watts MP, and other members of the committee—Mr Laurie Ferguson, Ms Nola Marino, Mr Graham Perrett, Ms Melissa Price, Mr Rowan Ramsey, Ms Maria Vanvakinou and Mrs Lucy Wicks—for their contribution to the report. I would also like to thank committee secretary, Mr Stephen Boyd; inquiry secretary, Ms Samantha Mannette; senior researcher, Dr John White; and the secretariat team for their diligent work on the report. I commend the report to the House.