

At the third stroke, there will be ... no more dial-up talking clock

[Carolyn Webb](#) April 18, 2019 — 11.59pm

For 66 years, its sonorous voice has provided certainty at times of doubt, but in 165 days, at the third stroke after midnight on October 1, Australia's 'talking clock' will fall silent.

After September 30, Australians will no longer be able to dial 1194 to find out the exact time.

No longer will that striking, somewhat ominous, voice intone: "at the third stroke, it will be... 10.27 and 50 seconds" before the familiar "pip, pip, pip".

Dennis Benjamin, executive chairman of Informatel, the Melbourne-based company that runs the number, says the "millisecond precise" service attracts about two million calls a year, and he wants it to continue.

"There's still great demand for it," he said.

"The number of calls for daylight saving this year exceeded last year."



Posters for the talking clock in 1953. *Telstra*

But the ultimate decision belonged to Telstra, which provides the service's network and billing, and Telstra is pulling the plug.

A Telstra spokesman said the service was not compatible with its new network technology.

"It's like any time you upgrade to radically new technology, sometimes older services wouldn't work," the spokesman said.

It was similar to how, "with software, if you're trying to use Microsoft Word 95 with the latest operating system, Windows 10", the spokesman said.

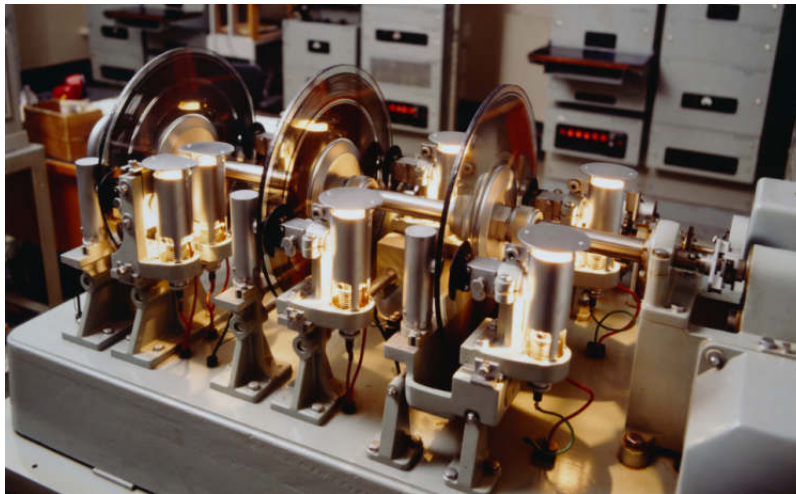
"Or with iPhone 3, you won't see those products working with the latest iPhone software. It's not compatible."

Mr Benjamin is optimistic that Telstra will reverse the decision.

"There is another network solution to provide it: cutting out ISDN [the older, Integrated Services Digital Network that carries voice and data services over the switched telephone network] - and using SIP [Session Initiation Protocol, that can send all forms of media including voice, data and video, to multiple parties].

"And ISDN is being phased out over the next three years. They don't need to cut this service off now."

The Telstra spokesman said although the public "now have many devices that provide an accurate time", the service has been given a three-month extension from the initial shut-down date June 30 "to give users more time to find an alternative solution".



The Telecom talking clock 1954-1990 from City West Exchange, Melbourne.

But Mr Benjamin, from Informatel, said the talking clock should be retained as a community service.

He said some businesses and customers without smart phones relied upon it.

"You and I rely on our [mobile] phones and most times, that would be fine. But there are other people who aren't as capable of looking at their phone or who are comfortable using the service because they've done it for decades. It's an important part of their lives".



High-tech: Gordon Gow, the voice of 'George' the talking clock when it was mechanised in 1953. *Telstra*

Mr Benjamin said it would cost too much money and effort to find another network provider.

Before its automation 66 years ago, people wanting to know the precise time would dial a telephone exchange, and operators would read the time from the exchange clock.

In 1953, well-spoken theatre critic Gordon Gow was paid £100 to record the hours, minutes and seconds for a new, mechanised system.

About 15 years ago, Telstra outsourced management of the service, nicknamed "George" to Informatel.

In 1990, Telstra replaced Gow's voice with ABC broadcaster Richard Peach.

Peach's voice can still be heard long after his death in 2008, although his relatives don't receive any royalties.



Carolyn Webb is a reporter for The Age.