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The telephone dial: Some queries answered

As a preliminary to the big reorganisation of postal and telephone services just announced, the P.M.G. [Postmaster-General] 's Department is now asking all new or transferred telephone subscribers to substitute numerals for the letters in their telephone numbers.

But whether the number dialled is XB2468 or 92-2468, the set of electrical impulses remains the same. So why drop the familiar and easily memorable code letters?



Early adopter Miss M.E. Burke gets to grips with the new number-only telephone on April 9, 1959. Credit: John O'Gready

Any subscriber putting this question to the P.M.G.'s Department will receive a rather lengthy answer. One question leads to another — and another, and another.

Australia's telephone dial has ten holes, each of which now carries one letter and one numeral. The P.M.G.'s Department considers that the description of these holes by two sets of symbols is unnecessary and confusing — particularly now that the six-digit telephone number is being replaced by the seven-digit

and ultimately the nine digit system as local and long-distance networks expand. Cronulla for example, had already exchanged its I.B prefix for 523.

But why not use three letters? LBF is exactly the same as 523.

Three-letter combinations from the present ten letters, replies the P.M.G. spokesman, would unduly restrict scope for future expansion. Such tongue-twisting combinations as "WUU" and "UWW" would be impracticable. Does "W double U" mean "WUU" or "WW"? Other three-letter codes would be undesirable for reasons of delicacy.

Then why not use 24 or 25 letters, three to a hole, as London and New York do? This would provide plenty of scope, and the prefix could be given some geographical meaning, such as CITY or MOSman.

London and New York have grown up with their system, which was a legacy from the manual exchange days. If we were to adopt it now, we would have to change the dials on all automatic telephones in Australia simultaneously — a Job which would cost £2,500,000 even if it were physically possible, which it is not. New equipment costing £3 million would also be needed in automatic exchanges for Sydney and Melbourne.

Australian war bride, Mrs Florence Doering receives a phone call from the US on 20 November 1957. Credit: Staff photographer

In any case, we want to simplify our dial rather than complicate it. Fortunately, we are in the position of being able to do so (because we still have only one letter and one numeral to each hole) almost without cost. Furthermore -- and this is one of the most important advantages of all-numeral dialling - letters would be a nuisance when nation-wide automatic dialling ultimately comes into being.

Why a nuisance?

Under the type of national numbering scheme planned, a Sydney subscriber requiring, say, the Melbourne service now shown as MF4567 would dial 03-63-4567. The prefix "03" would put him in touch with the right city. 63 would be the exchange, and "4567" the individual number. The subscriber would, of course, get the same number by dialling 03-MF-4567, but the change from numerals to letters and back to numerals again would be more likely to result in faulty dialling and recording than if all-numeral combinations here used.



That's all very well. But aren't letter-numeral combinations easier to remember than all-numeral ones?



*An example of the old-style letter and number telephone dial. This model included braille. From *The Mail, Adelaide*, February 8, 1941. Credit: Trove*

Some people may be able to remember a combination of letters and numerals more easily than an all-numeral equivalent. Certainly, most of the public, faced with the prospect of having to remember numbers in an unfamiliar form, believe this to be so.

But Dr R. Conrad of the British Medical Council's Applied Psychology Research Unit has conducted extensive tests on the ability of telephone operators to remember long telephone numbers of eight, nine and 10 digits. His results show that all-numeral combinations are greatly superior to letter-numeral combinations when heard, and only slightly inferior to letter-number combinations when read. Dr Conrad concluded that unless prefix letters were meaningful — represented a suburb name, for example — they were not necessarily an aid to memory.

All I know is that I personally find letters easier to remember.

Perhaps so. But the P.M.G.'s Department is convinced that the advantages of all-numeral dialling outweigh the only advantage of letter-numeral dialling, which is that some people believe letter-numeral combinations are easier to remember than all-numerals. A ten-symbol all-numeral dial will be much easier to read, and it will avoid confusion caused by unclear enunciation of such letters and numbers as "J" "A" and "8".

When dialling an all-numeral combination, the memory-train will not be interrupted by having to choose between letters and numerals at each hole. This will help to speed up dialling and more importantly, will reduce the time the exchange equipment is in use for each call.

We are not alone in preferring numerals. Some of the many countries using all-numeral dials are New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Japan and Israel.