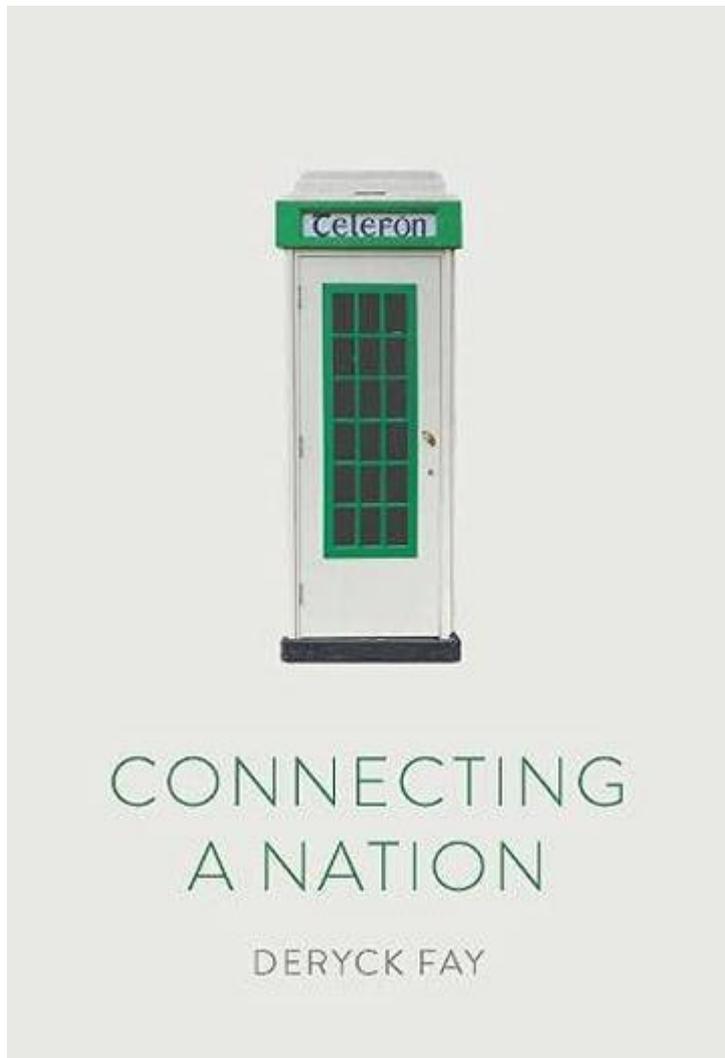


Deryck Fay on his fascinating history of Irish phones, the first televisions and how we went online



What led you to write your book about Irish telecommunications and the arrival of phones, TV and the internet?

I was always interested in infrastructure, and I found that there were lots of books about railways, electrification and the water supply but nothing comprehensive about telecoms.

Were we well advanced when it came to telephone technology?

There were great leaps forward and periods of stagnation. At the foundation of the State, there were advances with automation, but then from the 1930s to the 1970s it was slow. It could take two years to get a landline. My father was a dentist without a phone and he found that a man who came to him with a toothache worked for the Posts and Telegraphs. My dad asked him if he could get him a phone and he was told: "If you can sort out my toothache, we'll see what we can do." Soon afterwards we got a phone.

In the old days there were thousands of operators connecting calls. Who did that job?

The job was mostly done by women, because they were considered more dexterous. Men did the job at night. Ronnie Drew of the Dubliners worked as an operator. He once told of how a 'posh lady' came on and demanded to be put through immediately to an English number. Drew told her there would be a delay of an hour and 20 minutes. She became impatient and he "more or less told her what she could do with herself". She then said, "Do you know who you are talking to?" and told him she was the wife of the Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, and she would have him sacked. He asked her if she knew who she was talking to. She said, "No" and Drew replied, "Thanks be to Jaysus" and pulled out the cord.

When did TV arrive in the Republic?

In 1952, some people got the BBC, but reception was poor. When a new transmitter was built in Belfast in 1955, a lot of people could get the BBC. One of the first programmes was *About the Home*, which had a feature about how to breed rabbits to make a fur coat. There were concerns that there would be discussions about sexual matters, unsuitable for an Irish