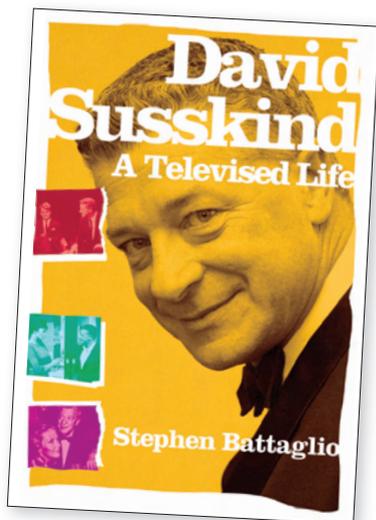


PORTRAIT OF A PIONEER

Producer and talk show host David Susskind turned TV into what it is today



BUY THE BOOK

David Susskind: A Televised Life (St. Martin's Press, \$26.99) is available at simonandschuster.com.

Talk show host and pioneering producer David Susskind, who spent nearly three decades as both the host of the talk show *Open End* and producer of some of TV's most sophisticated and daring dramas, was a passionate fan of TV.

To the small-screen executives of his day, Susskind's insistence on quality television often could be downright irritating. But as author Stephen Battaglio explains in a new biography, Susskind's high-minded ideals turned out to be just what the fast-growing medium needed.

The business editor for *TV Guide* magazine, Battaglio compiled his somewhat paradoxical portrait of Susskind—who died in 1987 at age 66—through more than 170 interviews with the top cultural figures of the latter 20th century. *Watch!* sat down with the author to delve into the complex story of this high-minded impresario and yet sometimes rough-hewn womanizer, whose reign during often tempestuous times forever changed the face of TV. — *Jim Colucci*

Watch!: What was the format of Susskind's show?

Battaglio: Susskind was always great with the press, giving big, bombastic quotes that made people pay attention. So in 1958, a new station in New York, Channel 13, asked him to do a talk show. They assured him he could talk each week for as little or as long as he wanted—there would be no set length. That's why they called it *Open End*, which became known as a show where guests could be very relaxed. It was a late-night show on Sunday that, by the end especially, Susskind was often paying for out of his own pocket. That gave him more freedom to talk about the timely subjects he wanted, like sexual mores or

the civil rights movement, in a much freer style than you were going to see anywhere else on TV.

Watch!: What effect did *Open End* have on American culture?

Battaglio: As just one example, in June 1963, Susskind had Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as his guest. This was a very compelling interview, and it showed King very calmly and sensibly talking about what black America wanted in terms of equality. It was at the very tipping point of the movement because two days later, President Kennedy announced his civil rights legislation. And Susskind was great on the show, too. Because clearly he was a sympathizer, and yet he asked all the questions that a scared white person would ask about the changing times.

Watch!: You talk in the book about Susskind's work in scripted television as well. How were his shows different from others of the time?

Battaglio: Susskind's company, Talent Associates, broke new ground in TV. With their 1963 CBS show *East Side/West Side*, it was considered revolutionary that they cast [black actress] Cicely Tyson alongside George C. Scott as New York social workers. And the show went into areas that had never been talked about in series television: police brutality, racism, mental illness. Then in 1967, they created *NYPD*, a half-hour cop show that featured, in actor Robert Hooks, the first black police officer on TV. It was shot all over New York City, in cooperation with the mayor's office and the real NYPD commissioner, in a fast-moving, gritty and provocative style. Even today, creators of TV's great procedural cop dramas cite *NYPD* as one of their models.

Watch!: What do you think is Susskind's legacy?

Battaglio: When it came to politics and culture, Susskind really helped move the needle. Often, he did that by saying crazy things and acting impetuously, and that's all in here. With a story like his, it can't just be about ratings and share points. I talk about his family life, his personal life, his temperament and his style. As I say in the book, he was a fiery life force. Today, people are used to big, attention-getting personalities, because there are so many cameras and so many places you can go to get that fix. But there weren't very many back then, and so David Susskind loomed large. And because of that ego, and that will, he brought the public a lot of good stuff. **U**