

20 Questions with John Stossel

By Kris Kitto - 12/07/09 08:27 PM ET

After 27 years at ABC News, John Stossel moved to the Fox News Channel and Fox Business this fall. Stossel has long been known for his libertarian views but is now in a position to be more expressive about them at his new Fox post. His weekly, hourlong show, debuting Thursday at 8 p.m. EST on Fox Business, will put Stossel in a new role. He'll host a panel of experts for discussion and also interact with a live studio audience. Stossel will also make weekly appearances on Fox News's "The O'Reilly Factor."

What made you decide to leave ABC for Fox News?

More freedom to do the economic reporting I wanted to do.

Your Fox Business show sounds like a new model for you. You'll be hosting a live audience and taking questions from them. How do you feel about that?

Excited and terrified.

Are you trying to fill the space Oprah will leave behind with her retirement?

[Laughs] I hadn't thought about that. No, I'm not as quick as Oprah or most of the anchors on Fox, who can do five hours a week. I can only do one hour. It takes me time to figure things out.

I understand you've been in rehearsals this week. How are they going?

We have done two. They've gone clumsily.

What else will be new for you with this move?

It's new going on "The O'Reilly Factor" once a week on Tuesdays and going up against the Lawnmower — that's what I call [Bill O'Reilly] behind his back. I was flattered that O'Reilly said, "I want Stossel on Tuesdays." [To prepare], on Monday I discuss topics with his producers and research them, so I won't be totally taken off guard on Tuesday.

Also, it's new to work with a studio audience on TV. It's new to invite people who are hostile to my idea and let it rip — but I feel good about that. I suggested it because I've been doing that [when] speaking at colleges, and it's lively. It's how I got the idea to do the audience. It won't all be college students. We certainly have reached out — because they are opinionated.

What do you hope to get done at Fox that you couldn't do at ABC?

More economic reporting. ABC gave me several specials a year. Fox Business gives me 44.

You've chosen Ayn Rand's book Atlas Shrugged as the topic of your first episode. Why?

Of the first three episodes, one will be on Atlas Shrugged, one will be on global warming and one will be on healthcare.

Rand's book is a best-seller even though it's 50 years old. It's outselling [my book] Give Me a Break. People are touched by something in it. She predicted 53 years ago the explosive, repulsive vomit of government growth that we are experiencing under Obama and which began under Bush and the presidents before them.

Who are some of your dream guests?

Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, Ludwig von Mises

FRIEDRICH VON HAYEK, MILTON FRIEDMAN, AYN RAND, LUDWIG VON MISES.

Unfortunately, they're all dead.

You've been very open about your libertarian views. How did you form those views?

Four years of consumer reporting eventually taught me that government regulation failed.

Who are some libertarian thinkers whom you admire?

The scholars at the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation. The blogger Virginia Postrel was one of the first to open my brain.

Were you interested in politics and political thought growing up?

Very little. ... I was wishing I was taller and bigger and a professional athlete.

What kinds of Washington-centered stories might you pursue on your new show?

I will be looking for grand examples of arrogance. There are only two ways to do things in life — voluntary and force. Government is force. We need some force, we need the rule of law. But the Founders had it right in wanting to limit government. What the Founders had in mind, the self-important arrogant politicians have long passed. I will seek to confront those who are arrogant and praise those who are modest, who understand the limits of government force.

What is your analysis of the current administration and the 111th Congress?

I think they are arrogant. They act as if life revolves around Washington or life revolves around government action, or they act as if government can fix an economy. My experience is that government makes it worse.

How do you feel about Washington generally?

It's a pretty place. I like the sand volleyball games in Rock Creek Park.

Where do you see yourself fitting in at Fox? Who are some of your new colleagues whom you admire?

Andrew Napolitano and Glenn Beck.

How do you feel about opinion journalism in general? The Glenn Becks, Keith Olbermanns of the world?

I think those programs are opinion journalism, and that's fine. It's good to have choices.

What would you want to do if you weren't still working in journalism?

Be a professional beach volleyball player.

What story are you most proud of or is most memorable to you?

"Stupid in America," which took on the government K-12 education monopoly.

"Scaring Us to Death," which took on myself and my colleagues in the media.

What story are you least proud of? Or what story do you wish you could redo?

My stories on dioxin, the deadliest chemical. Exploding coffee pots. God, I've done some silly stories over the years.

In your 2006 book *Myths, Lies and Downright Stupidity*, you write that the media do a "dismal job" of putting stories into perspective. "We know that the scarier and more bizarre the story," you write, "the more likely it is that our bosses will give us more airtime or a front-page slot." What's missing from that sentence is "homepage." How do you think the Internet factors into this assertion?

Internet hypes, too, but at least it give us more choice. It makes it easier to check, to separate myths from the truth.

What are some of your hobbies?

Beach volleyball, bike riding and reading about liberty.

Any consumer stories related to the holidays that we should know about this year?

I am researching a story on a survey of which store chains are rudest and which treat their customers well. I hope to have that for "The O'Reilly Factor" on [Dec. 15].

To recommend a political personality for 20 Questions, call Kris Kitto at (202)628-8539 or e-mail him at kkitto@thehill.com.