

**Click Here to see
 Interesting Quote(s)
 Below**

ads by Google

Find a Job: [View all job ads](#) | [Newspapers/Wires](#) | [TV/Radio](#) | [Magazines](#)
[Newsletters / Misc.](#) | [Diversity Jobs](#)

| [Home](#) | [Interview with Matt Labash, The Weekly Standard -- May 2003](#)

October 10, 2005

Matt Labash, 32, is a senior writer with The Weekly Standard, a magazine launched in 1995. Before joining the Standard in '95, Labash worked for the Albuquerque Monthly, Washingtonian Magazine, and American Spectator. In 2002, Labash was selected by Columbia Journalism Review as one of 'Ten Young Writers on the Rise.' Labash graduated from the University of New Mexico. He spoke with JournalismJobs.com about the Jayson Blair scandal, on being a non-embed in Kuwait, and the rise in popularity of conservative media outlets.

JournalismJobs.com: What's your take on the Jayson Blair affair? Who's to blame?

Matt Labash: Probably his editors. I think that's a safe bet. I think Jayson Blair is to blame actually. I'm up for a good New York Times bashing like everybody else. It's a great paper on balance, but they screwed up. Obviously they shouldn't have looked the other way.

But truth be told, it's pretty easy to perpetuate a fraud as a journalist as anyone who is a journalist knows. It's not that difficult to do. You can make things up and nobody's there to check it. It's kind of an honor system with your editors. In this case, they had all sorts of indications that something was amiss and they didn't do anything about it. They're getting the beating they deserve right now. It's a pretty ballsy thing to be filing stories from places you've never been. I felt like I was there when Jayson Blair was writing. Unfortunately he wasn't. It's pretty unbelievable. If I was going to make stuff up, at least I'd get on a plane and go through the trouble of going there.



JournalismJobs.com: You recently returned from Kuwait. Were you an embed? What was it like reporting from a war zone?

Matt Labash: I was embedded at the resort Hilton in Kuwait. The joke was kind of on us -- the non-embeds. I originally got a draw to go with the 1st Cavalry. I was all excited about that. Robert Duvall's unit in Apocalypse Now. I could really see myself landing on the beach and burning hooches and all that. It turns out I was advised by someone who knew better that the 1st Cavalry wasn't going to get off the bench during this war. I don't know if they ever got out of Fort Hood, Texas.

My editors said, "Screw it. Everybody's embedding anyway. Why not go to Kuwait City and be a floater and view the media scene and all that stuff." That was easier to broker with my wife as well. We have two young children, a three year-old and a six month-old. She wasn't too happy about Daddy going out to some place to possibly get shot at in the service of the story. I said, "Yeah, I'll go to Kuwait and nibble around the edges," fully intending to make my way in whenever possible, which we did several times on accompanied trips.

Like I said, the joke was on us. All the non-embeds thought we'd have all this freedom and it turns out we had less freedom than the journalists who were stuck with the units. We were at the mercy of the PAOs. They shut down the borders and they shut down the third of the country that you had to get through just to get to the border. So even if you wanted to do a suicide run, the chances were that you were going to get your vehicle stuck in a ditch or get shot at one of the crossings. Another journalist and I tried to make a run at one time and we hired a driver for \$500. We thought we were all set. We get there and they turned us back. We tried to bribe them. It was kind of ugly. We were driving back and we asked our driver, "What gives. We could have gotten turned back all by ourselves." He said, "I'm not going off-road. They'll shoot you in the back." It was difficult to get in. Not to say that people didn't.

JournalismJobs.com: Did you don a chemical suit?

Matt Labash: I donned a chemical suit about nine or 10 times a day. The alarm kept going off in our hotel. This was back when we thought Saddam had chemical weapons and was willing to use them. Everybody took it real seriously at first. As time went on, people got more cynical. The guy who lived next to me actually unscrewed the alarm in his room because it was interfering with Fashion TV. At a certain point, you walk out on the balcony to check out the

scene to see if everyone was like you and you feel like a dork. Everybody else was going about their business, ignoring it, even though two missiles landed pretty close to our hotel.

JournalismJobs.com: Why have conservative media outlets like The Weekly Standard and Fox News Channel become more popular in the past few years?

Matt Labash: Because they feed the rage. We bring the pain to the liberal media. I say that mockingly, but it's true somewhat. We come with a strong point of view and people like point of view journalism. While all these hand-wringing Freedom Forum types talk about objectivity, the conservative media likes to rap the liberal media on the knuckles for not being objective. We've created this cottage industry in which it pays to be un-objective. It pays to be subjective as much as possible. It's a great way to have your cake and eat it too. Criticize other people for not being objective. Be as subjective as you want. It's a great little racket. I'm glad we found it actually.

JournalismJobs.com: A lot of interesting stories came out of the Clinton administration. Is there less material to write about with Bush in office?

Matt Labash: I've never been a real hard-core political writer. I sort of live on the fringes and find stories that amuse me. My editors let me do that. Obviously, there was a lot of low-hanging fruit with the Clinton administration. If I were on the other side of the political street, I'd think there's probably still plenty to work with Bush-wise. Theoretically, there is. But with 9/11, all bets are off. The world has opened up to us. People are getting to view things that they never would view otherwise. I mean, we didn't think we would be covering a war when Bush first came into office. The agenda started changing. You don't have to worry about making sport of third-rate government bureaucrats. You have bigger, better things to write about.

JournalismJobs.com: You've written about the pornography business, Monica Lewinsky's new job, 9/11 and traffic cams. How do you pick your stories and which one are you especially proud of?

Matt Labash: {Mockingly} There are so many I'm proud of. It's essentially dumb luck. I look for little pockets that go unmined, which is harder and harder to find these days. The great thing about ideological journalism a couple years ago was that you could go out on a story with 20 other guys and there would still be stuff left on the table by the time you took off. You go off for three days on some kind of campaign trip and nobody would write the story behind the story. Nobody would write the micro stuff. Nobody would write how we get to the story. Instead they covered the dog and pony show. Now, everybody writes the micro story, and there's the bloggers chewing over all the ideological angles. These things happen on a Monday. By Wednesday, they're chewed to death.

There's nothing original or interesting left to say. The advantage you have over the bloggers is that you can actually leave your office and see and do things. That's pretty much what I try to do. The division of labor at the Standard is you do that and you do Web pieces. The Web pieces are a lot riff-ier, and pop-culture-y and you can polish it off in a day or two. But other stuff is: go see the world and find an interesting nook and cranny. Those are the kind of things I like to do best. I like to find little undiscovered pockets or subjects or interesting people and just ride them into the ground. Things I know other people aren't going to get at.

JournalismJobs.com: What type of journalist would you describe yourself as?

Matt Labash: A magical one? {mock-serious}. I work in the right-wing world, but we have a good understanding at the magazine that everyone gets to follow their interests and eccentricities. Our editors encourage that. It makes it a good place to work. They give us a lot of writerly freedom. I'm less interested in scoring ideological points than in finding good stories. Good stories shouldn't have to conform to some predetermined formula. A lot of times they don't.

The best stories are the ones that take a left turn somewhere and surprise you anyway. I basically come off of a piece and if it's a piece I'm proud of, there's about 30 minutes of satisfaction and then I'm like, "Geez. I'm never going to find another good piece again." I'm just swinging from vine to vine looking for good pieces. If they conform to our ideological template, that's great. If they don't, I'm much more interested in keeping my readers amused or interested.

JournalismJobs.com: What do you aim for in your stories -- are you going for the shock factor?

Matt Labash: If shock pays off and it happens to be true, I do. I don't mind doing that. I like doing that. I like the little double splash on a story, but I also don't like to do the formulaic, contrarian, everything-you-know-is-wrong-every-time piece. It's a fun piece to write. I write it plenty of times, but I don't think I deliberately try. It's hard to shock people anymore. I write occasionally for Nerve.com and Nerve magazine, which

prides itself as a literary smut magazine. They're good people. I like them and they like me and we both like sex. I'm sort of the house prude and the pet reactionary. It strikes me when I'm doing it. They actually hire a guy like me to react against sex because it's impossible to shock people with sex these days.

I think our capacity for shock has diminished. It's pretty hard to do it anymore, you know? I don't really know exactly what shock value means. Everybody's so politically incorrect these days, which kind of erodes the franchise. We used to have that field to ourselves in the early to mid-90s. Now, who's not irreverent? Everybody is. You really want to be politically incorrect? Be politically correct.

JournalismJobs.com: Is it true you covered the World Pornography Conference?

Matt Labash: It is true. I actually used to be a porn star (laughs). It was a professors and porn conference. It had an academic sheen to it and that was my excuse for going. But I just wanted to write about porn stars, which most people do at some point. They like to shock the square apparently. They can shock people in a way that I can't. You like to think that as a writer you can write a piece that can really grab people by the balls. The porn stars actually do grab people by the balls. That's like their calling card. They'll come up and just, hello, that's not a toy.

It was an interesting little world. I felt like I needed to take a scalding shower for about a week after it. It's no place I'd want to live. But that didn't seem to stop many of the professors who've actually made it a discipline. They study it full-time. It's a great way to get their universities to subsidize their spank banks, I suppose.

JournalismJobs.com: In your stories you come across as a pretty funny guy. Have you ever considered a career in TV as a pundit?

Matt Labash: No, I hate television. I love to watch it. That's my place -- in front of the TV. I have friends who go on TV a lot and say, "You ought to be on TV." I don't do it partly because of performance anxiety. I'm pretty sure I'm going to screw it up. Second, it just makes me feel like a fraud. Popping off about issues of the day that I'm considered an expert on simply because I read the paper that morning doesn't feel right to me, which is surprising because I pop off a lot in real life. You take me out to lunch and put a few beers in me and I'll pop off all you want. Going on TV sort of formalizes it. It makes me feel like a dork and that's my rule of thumb public behavior-wise: try not to be a dork.

A lot of [pundits] pull it off. There are very few people who have expertise across the board in anything, so you have to find amateurs who can express themselves well. But I think it's unfairly derided. Tucker Carlson used to work at The Weekly Standard and now he's on CNN. He's a natural -- one of the best. He can go on the air and know nothing about a subject and pull off a beautiful piece of performance art. I'm not convinced I can do that. It's a skill. People deride television as stupid, saying you're not as thoughtful as a writer. If you're a writer, you have a lot of time to be thoughtful. You have time to craft and re-craft. To get off the mark on the spot and be able to do that day in and day out and not run into a wall, there's a lot of people who can't do that, as you see nightly on MSNBC.

JournalismJobs.com: Do you have any aspirations to write for a mainstream publication that's not conservative?

Matt Labash: Whoever lets me do what I want, that's what my aspirations are. And if I get paid for it, all the better. I suppose I should come up with some sort of game plan, but the Standard is a very comfortable place to work. Even if your sensibilities don't exactly match the editors, they pretty much let you go your own way.

Copyright © 2003 JournalismJobs.com. All rights reserved.

Other JournalismJobs.com interviews:

- [Michele Norris, co-host of 'All Things Considered,' National Public Radio, April 2003](#)
- [Bob Schieffer, correspondent/anchor, CBS News/Face the Nation, March 2003](#)
- [Larry Lee, CEO, SacObserver.com \(Sacramento Observer\), Feb. 2003](#)
- [Larry Reisman, editor, Vero Beach \(Fla.\) Press Journal, Jan. 2003](#)
- [Deborah Potter, former ABC News/CNN reporter, Nov./Dec. 2002](#)
- [Orville Schell, dean, Univ. of California, Berkeley, Graduate J-school, Sept. 2002](#)
- [Tracy Wood, editor, Ms. Magazine, August 2002](#)
- [Mike Hoyt, executive editor, Columbia Journalism Review, July 2002](#)
- [Louis Wiley, executive editor, PBS 'Frontline,' May/June 2002](#)
- [John Sasaki, reporter, KTVU-TV \(FOX\), March/April 2002](#)
- [Dan Fost, media reporter, San Francisco Chronicle, February 2002](#)

- [Carol Guzy, photographer, The Washington Post, January 2002](#)
- [Roger Cohn, editor-in-chief, Mother Jones Magazine, December 2001](#)
- [Mike Luckovich, cartoonist, Atlanta Journal-Constitution -- November 2001](#)
- [Lisa Chamberlain, editor-in-chief, Cleveland Free Times -- October 2001](#)
- [Ben Fong-Torres, former reporter and editor, Rolling Stone magazine -- October 2001](#)
- [Raul Ramirez, news director, KQED Radio -- September 2001](#)
- [James Daly, former founder and editor, Business 2.0 Magazine -- August 2001](#)
- [James Fallows, correspondent, The Atlantic Monthly -- July 2001](#)
- [David Ignatius, executive editor, International Herald Tribune -- July 2001](#)
- [David Talbot, founder and editor, Salon.com -- June 2001](#)
- [Ed Fouhy, former CBS, ABC and NBC news executive -- June 2001](#)
- [Linda Cohn, anchor/reporter, ESPN -- May 2001](#)
- [Sol Levine, former producer, CNN -- April 2001](#)
- [Charlie LeDuff, reporter, New York Times -- March 2001](#)
- [Pierre Thomas, correspondent, ABC News -- March 2001](#)
- [Gene Roberts, former managing editor, New York Times -- February 2001](#)
- [Sydnie Kohara, anchor, CNET.com -- January 2001](#)
- [Lowell Bergman, former producer, 60 Minutes -- January 2001](#)
- [Joie Chen, anchor, CNN -- December 2000](#)
- [David Plotz, Washington Bureau Chief, Slate.com -- November 2000](#)
- [Christopher John Farley, senior writer and pop music critic, Time Magazine -- October 2000](#)
- [Bob Edwards, news anchor, National Public Radio -- October 2000](#)
- [Sharon Epperson, CNBC correspondent -- September 2000](#)
- [David Maraniss, reporter, The Washington Post -- April 2000](#)
- [Wolf Blitzer, anchor, CNN -- March 2000](#)

Job Seekers: [Post a Resume](#) | [Job Notification](#) | [Job Seeker Folder](#)
Employers: [Post a Job](#) | [Search Resumes](#) | [Employer Folder](#)

[Internships](#) | [Fellowships](#) | [Awards/Contests](#) | [Media Links](#) | [Career Advice](#)
[Password](#) | [Advertising](#) | [About Us](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Home](#)

Rossi & Rovetti Flowers

Flower Delivery in Bay Area, Ca Since 1900. Easy Online Ordering !
www.rossirovetti.com

Copyright © 1998-2005. JournalismJobs.com LLC. All Rights Reserved.
Site usage subject to [Terms and Conditions](#). Read our [Privacy Policy](#).
Tel. 510-653-1521. E-mail: contact@journalismjobs.com