



Log In

Join HuffPost Plus

AdChoices

**Rory O'Connor, Contributor**

Rory O'Connor is a discontent provider.

Jose Antonio Vargas Is an American Hero

06/22/2011 06:18 pm ET | Updated Aug 22, 2011



I first met [Jose Antonio Vargas](#) in the fall of 2008, in the midst of the historic Obama campaign for the presidency. At the time, I was a fellow at the [Joan Shorenstein Center](#) on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, where I was researching the impact of the then-emerging social media on older legacy forms of journalism, such as newspapers.

A woman named [Maralee Schwartz](#) was also at the Kennedy School when I was there. Beginning in 1979, Maralee had spent her entire professional career at the *Washington Post*, largely as a political reporter and political editor. As national political editor, she led the *Post's* award-winning teams of reporters in coverage including three presidential elections, the last term of the Clinton White House, and the first term of the Bush White House.

HUFFPOST**REAL LIFE. REAL NEWS.
REAL VOICES.**

Jose Antonio Vargas Is an American Hero



Support HuffPost

As a “lifer” at the *Post*, and like many of her peers at the time in the so-called “mainstream, media,” Maralee was, shall we say, extremely wary of the new media. When she heard upon our first meeting that I was researching how social networks were affecting journalism, for example, she promptly fired back, “Social networks? You mean those places online people go to get dates?”

Despite her pronounced skepticism, Maralee was still open enough to at least consider the possibility that there might be something to my seemingly wild contention that social media would have a major impact on the way journalism would be practiced in the near future. A few weeks after we met, she knocked loudly on my office door, and when I opened it, literally shoved a young man in. “This is Jose Antonio Vargas,” she announced. “He gets what you’re doing!” And then she marched off, leaving Vargas in her considerable wake.

We spent the next hour talking, and I quickly ascertained that Maralee was right — this guy really did get it! Quick, articulate, savvy and full of energy, the 27-year old immigrant from the Philippines had already been part of a [Pulitzer Prize-winning team](#) at the *Post* — and he certainly seemed poised to attain even greater honor and success in the near future, pursuing a career that had already taken him at a still tender age (to me at least!) near the pinnacle of establishment journalism...

Vargas then surprised me by proceeding to castigate his employer as completely behind the curve and mired in a rapidly fading past glory. “These guys don’t understand,” Vargas complained. “They should fire most of the editors and hire a bunch of graphic designers and online journalists,” he announced with the impatience and brashness of youth.

I realized immediately that Vargas, whose Pulitzer participation came about when he cleverly used [social media](#) like Facebook to break news about the Virginia Tech campus massacre, was exactly the sort of young, hip and connected reporter places like the *Post* desperately needed in order to make the transition to a new digital form of journalism. I also realized that Vargas probably was not long for that world.

In short order he did walk away — from what, in an earlier era, would have been seen as the opportunity of a lifetime — in order to join the online upstart [Huffington Post](#). He was among the first, in what soon became a wave, and then a tsunami of journalists, who were abandoning major media platforms like the *Post*, the *New York Times* and national television networks to work in a new form of journalism online



In the years that followed, Jose enjoyed great success at HuffPost, and also began freelancing for major national magazines, including writing [a landmark piece](#) for the *New Yorker* about Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg. [A series of articles](#) he had written about H.I.V./AIDS became a documentary film called "[The Other City](#)," which opened at the Tribeca Film Festival last year and was broadcast on Showtime — and along the way, Jose also came out as gay and wrote movingly about how he could and would no longer keep secrets about who he was and how he felt.

But despite his many amazing successes, Vargas still felt incomplete. Now we know why.

In an [incredibly moving and important piece](#) in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, "My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant," he has just "come out" again — this time bravely and dangerously revealing that he is an undocumented immigrant, who has lived in the shadows since arriving in the USA in 1993 as a 12-year-old. Yes, this young man, on the fast track to attaining the putative American Dream, has now exposed himself not as "American" — but as "other."

Jose Antonio Vargas is incredibly brave to risk everything he has accomplished in this country in order to tell the truth and to shine, yet another but still much-needed, light on the pressing need for comprehensive immigration reform in this country. He, and millions like him, have much to contribute to America — and without people like them, our country will be far poorer.

If there isn't room in the United States for people like Jose Antonio — the precise type of people who made this country great — I despair for our collective future. I urge you to read his inspiring story, and then to take action to ensure that Jose Antonio — and the many others like him — aren't forced to choose between hiding in the shadows or risking it all by telling the truth.



BEFORE YOU GO



Jose Antonio Vargas Is an American Hero

