

# letting the Lorax speak for the trees

*Fourth graders take on Hollywood - and win!*

*This case study is published as part of the Democracy Center's series of Climate Campaign Profiles. These studies have been produced to gather lessons from climate activism in diverse places and contexts in order to share these with other campaigners and help build the effectiveness of their advocacy work. You can find the full series in the Climate & Democracy section of our website.*

**By Ben Castle**

## the story

Written by Dr. Seuss in 1971, *The Lorax* ranks as many people's all time favourite childhood book. It tells the story of an imaginary world where a forest dwelling orange creature called the Lorax tries to stop the felling of the magic 'truffula' trees by the greedy Once-ler. The story acts as a fable, warning of the dangers of environmental destruction resulting from the relentless pursuit of material wealth. In November 2011 a class of nine- and ten-year olds from The Park School in Brookline, Massachusetts, USA, was excited to hear that a film adaptation of the story was planned for release in early 2012. They had previously read and enjoyed the book with their teacher Ted Wells. However, when they visited the film's website they were disappointed to

see not a single reference to the Lorax's original message of environmental sustainability. Frustrated by this they decided to try and do something about it, and in doing so initiated a compelling campaign which saw a fourth grade class take on Universal Pictures, one of Hollywood's biggest movie production companies, and win!

Mr. Wells' class launched an [online petition on Change.org](#) asking Universal Pictures to 'green up' the film's website by including more environmental messages, advice and resources. Before long the petition had caught the attention of a number of major blogs and the national press and was being tweeted about by celebrities. In less than two months over 57,000 signatures had been received and in late January 2012 Universal Pictures agreed to update their website, incorporating the exact changes that had been requested by the class.

## the targets

The primary target for the campaign was Universal Pictures, the production company which made the *Lorax* film and which was responsible for the website content. NBC Universal (parent company of Universal Pictures) is one of the world's biggest media and entertainment com-

panies, with an [annual profit of \\$2.26 bn in 2009](#). To help increase accountability the class identified specific individuals with the necessary authority and made them the target of the petition. These were: Jeanne Cordova, Vice President of Marketing, Publicity and Special Events, and Eddie Egan, President of Marketing.

Secondary targets included visitors to the Lorax website and the film's audience in general. By improving the environmental messages and information hosted on the website, a potentially significant number of visitors would become better informed and able to access educational resources. As the class put it themselves in their petition to Universal, 'The Lorax movie, with its millions of dollars in advertizing and massive audience, has the potential to help our natural world. Your movie could inspire more and more people to treat Earth with care'.

## the strategy

### Messaging Strategy:

#### Let the Lorax Speak for the Trees – and let the children speak for the Lorax!

The principle message of the campaign was that the movie website should stay true to the powerful environmental sustainability message of the original book and be something 'that Dr. Seuss would be proud of'. The appeal to honour the author's original intentions is clearly a strong argument and was particularly appealing to the many fans of the original book.

As the intended audience of both the book and the movie, children have a naturally high level of legitimacy when commenting on the book's original message and critiquing the credibility of the film's websites. The fact that the campaign was led by children therefore helped increase the

strength of the message. Being accused by children of betraying the spirit of the original book was particularly stinging criticism for Universal Pictures and an embarrassment right at the time when they were beginning to ramp up marketing promotion for the film. The views of Mr. Wells' class also resonated strongly because as young people they are potentially most impacted by environmental issues.

Importantly, the campaign was genuinely led by the children. Mr. Wells emphasizes that the campaign was initiated and spearheaded by the class and that he played only a facilitating role. "I really tried not to be overly influential on the petition....They were really in the driving seat. I didn't put this in their lap. I helped set it up for them but they were the ones stimulating and coming up with ideas and they did a lot of writing and thinking and creative work." In developing the wording of the petition, the class did an exercise where they worked in pairs using an outline guide to produce their own petitions. The final version contains wording from every student in the class.

While the campaign was led by the children, Mr. Wells explains that arriving at an achievable and focussed objective did require a little help from him: "Some students wanted to change the advertisements and some kids wanted to change the movie as well... I actually had to tone them down and help them be a little less ambitious and a little more realistic!"

As well as focusing on an achievable objective the petition included specific suggestions for how the website could be improved, including a 'Lorax Tips' button that leads the viewer to a 'list of ways one can help the planet'. Providing realistic and sensible suggestions helped the peti-

tion seem reasonable and made it more difficult for Universal Pictures to refuse the demands.

While the clear, well-articulated demands of the petition were undoubtedly key to building its popularity, the positive and unusual nature of the story was also helpful in capturing people's imagination and the interest of the press. Mr. Wells explains that "there is so much bad news out there. The media loves a good news story and here are some kids trying to save the world and do something positive. And it's unique. It's unusual to see a David and Goliath story like this where children are given the chance and the tool like a petition to speak pretty loudly."

### **Ally Strategy: reaching out to online friends and the media**

A key ally for Mr. Well's class was Change.org, the online petition website with the stated purpose 'to build an international network of people empowered to fight for what's right locally, nationally, and globally.' Launched in 2007, the website provides a ready-made platform on which anyone can set up a petition on a cause they are concerned about. It has exploded in popularity over the last year, with a reported 10,000 new petitions being launched per month which attract millions of signatures.

The Change.org platform provides a means for people to access and share the content of the petition instantly. The format is also highly media friendly with the petition wording and a dedicated 'about this petition' section effectively acting as a press release with statements and quotes which the media can use when reporting on the campaign. There is also space for photographs to help bring campaigns to life and give the all important personal touch which is often key in attracting the attention of journalists.



**Mr. Wells' class with a copy of the original Lorax book by Dr. Suess.**

As well as providing the petition platform Change.org promotes a proportion of the petitions directly to its membership and offers [online](#) and personalized expert advice on how to plan and deliver a successful petition. "They were very helpful...We got lucky in that regard," Mr. Wells says when talking about the support the class received from staff at Change.org.

The speed with which the class's petition attracted the attention of online commentators and the national press is testament to the potential effectiveness of Change.org as a tool for campaigners. The class also discussed and planned how best to spread the word about their petition. Mr. Wells describes the process: "they [the children] were talking about how we could try and get everyone in school to sign it, we could do an assembly to get everyone in school to sign it. We could send an email to all our relatives. We can put it on Facebook. And some kids are savvy and they put it on Facebook. We did all the above and they had lots of very good ideas about what to do in our immediate circles and then we talked about could we get this in our local newspaper, how else can we get a large

## Timeline

**Late November 2011** The class view the website and decide to launch a petition.

**19th December 2011** 250 signatures reached.

**21st January 2012** LA Times online reports on story. 4000 signatures reached.

**25th January 2012** Mother Jones and Grist report on the story and Edward Norton tweets about it. 25,000 signatures reached.

**26th January 2012** 57,000 signatures reached. Universal announce that they are improving the website.

audience for it. And they [the children] had all the right answers for that kind of thing.”

Mr. Wells used a [blog post](#) on the news and comment website The Huffington Post to promote the petition. A series of other influential websites and blogs also picked up the story, including [Grist](#) and [Mother Jones](#). The [Boston Globe](#) also ran an online story. Before long national media, including [LA Times online](#), were running stories. The campaign also attracted some high profile celebrity endorsement, with the band 30 Seconds to Mars promoting the petition to their hundreds of thousands of supporters through their blog and via Facebook. On 24th January actor Edward Norton tweeted about the petition to his 1,286,000 followers: ‘This is really great. Let’s rally and put their numbers through the roof.’

By 26th January, less than two months after launching the petition, 57,000 signatures had been received. An executive from Universal

then phoned Mr. Wells to say that the website was going to be updated. The resulting changes to the website included a Lorax Tips button shaped like a truffle tree seed, just as the class had requested. The button links through to the Lorax Project website, an initiative run by Random House (the publisher of the original book) and Conservation International, with information, activities and games focused on protecting forests and endangered species. There is also now a link to Lorax-themed teaching resources and materials in partnership with Scholastic, which Universal say was already in the pipeline but accelerated by the actions of Mr. Wells’ class.

Following the success of the campaign it received further media attention. In February 2012, the class’s campaign was the subject of an [article by Nicholas Kristof](#) in the New York Times and it was then the focus of Diane Sawyer’s regular ABC News piece ‘Persons of the week’. The success of the campaign and the praise received by the class has already got them thinking about what they would like to focus on next.

## Read on

[‘Let the Lorax speak for the trees!’ The petition by Mr. Wells’ class on Change.org](#)

[‘After Recess: Change the world’, New York Times, by Nicholas Kristof](#)

[‘Universal Studios Takes School Kids’ Notes and Greens ‘The Lorax’, Take Part, by Allan MacDonell](#)

[‘Who Will Speak For The Trees?’ Mother Jones, by Kate Sheppard](#)

[‘A victory for Cute Kids, Civic Engagement, and the Trees’, Mother Jones, by Kate Sheppard](#)



# Lessons

## The moral authority of children

Helping children to voice their views can have powerful results. As those most likely to suffer the impacts of climate change and environmental harm, and with little responsibility for such problems, children often have a natural desire and undoubtedly have the prerogative to comment on such issues. Children can also have a strong sense of right and wrong and as Georgia, one of the students, explained to [Take Part](#), “Sometimes adults forget what’s most important.” The satisfaction derived from a successful campaign can also give children a lifelong motivation to engage in social issues. Georgia says that the experience has taught her that “even though we might be very little, we can still make a lot of change in anything we work hard at.”

Mr. Wells commented, “I think they didn’t realize how big a movie studio is, or how hard it is to change the website with a studio that doesn’t want to admit any wrong”. As the Lorax campaign illustrates, the involvement of children can also help attract significant press interest. This is not the same as using children to make a political point! Care must always be taken to ensure any such campaigns are genuinely child-led and

not overly influenced or hijacked by adults’ own agendas.

## The power of internet-based campaigning

The Lorax campaign illustrates the remarkable power of new online tools and social media. Instantaneous, mass communication through Facebook, Twitter and websites such as Change.org or [avaaz.org](#) are changing the rules of campaigning and, used effectively, have the potential to empower all sorts of individuals, groups and causes.

## The power of positive news

It seems very likely that at least part of the reason for the high level of media interest in the Lorax campaign was due to it being a ‘good news’ story. With so many news items making for grim and depressing reading, editors are often on the lookout for more uplifting pieces to help offer some balance. Not all campaigns easily lend themselves to being a ‘positive’ news story. However, successfully framing a campaign’s message in both original and positive terms can help deliver significant media coverage.

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