



“We will not win because we are right, we will win because we are organized”: Tom Brookes of the Global Strategic Communications Council on changing narratives, movement building and changing the funding landscape

Alec Saelens

September 4, 2024

Alec Saelens: Could you start by telling me more about the work you are doing with both the Meliore Foundation and the Global Strategic Communications Council.

Tom Brookes: I'm a political communications person who uses storytelling and discourse to shape political space. Since 2009, I've applied these skills to address the climate crisis. The Global Strategic Communications Council (GSCC) was born from the Climategate scandal, where distorted climate science information significantly influenced public discourse. This highlighted the need for a responsive, non-campaign-aligned organization to navigate and impact climate communication globally.

The Global Strategic Communications Council is a network of political communications professionals across the world who work not with just the climate movement, like NGOs, but also academics, business groups, community groups, and others. We help integrate these voices and ideas into the discourse at strategic moments to impact climate action.

As the CEO and founder of GSCC, I also oversee the Meliore Foundation. We moved from being hosted by the European Climate Foundation to establishing our own foundation, which now houses GSCC and other initiatives. Our work focuses on applying strategic communications to address global challenges and help society avoid the worst impacts of climate change while maintaining a semblance of civilization.

Alec Saelens: What makes the Council distinct compared to other types of organizations that do strategic communications? Why do you approach the work the way that you do?

Tom Brookes: What makes it different is that it's not designed to be famous. We build campaigns in a traditional sense around brands or people. Massive change has been made in the world by creating a presence which then becomes recognizable. One of the most impactful arguments against climate action is that it's too expensive. We have to win that argument, we have to change that idea. It has to become understood that not acting is the worst economic decision. There are a million different ways you can [frame] that depending on who you're talking to.

All of the debate around these issues is manufactured. You have to create ways for people to come on board, bring them into that space. It comes back to this very important rule: We will not win because we are right, we will win because we are organized. GSCC is an organizational layer, but it's non-visible. It doesn't take credit for the work that it does, it doesn't need to be famous. We can help [amplify] those voices. We've worked with Greta Thunberg, we've worked with lots of people that you've heard of in many different ways, but our job is thinking about the contextual nature of the discourse these people are working in, and shaping that.

Alec Saelens: Tell me more about how you go about doing that. Do you have an example that illustrates the impact of your work, those small segment interventions that create a larger shift in the discourse on a more macro level?

Tom Brookes: One of the good things that's happened in the move towards low carbon emission over the last 15 years is that the world has massively reduced its coal use. All fossil fuels are harmful, but coal is the worst because it has the highest CO₂ output per energy unit.

Fifteen years ago, the narrative around coal was that it was cheap, plentiful, and it fueled China's economic growth, lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Our challenge was to completely change that story, making the story of coal real, it's expensive, dangerous, and a historic mistake. There were many local NGOs running campaigns to highlight how coal plants

were killing people, polluting the environment, and providing little economic benefit to local communities. Lawyers worked to block new coal plants using planning laws. Our job was to create a larger, global discourse to make coal investments understood to be bad financial decisions, which would lead to investors pulling their money out of coal.

Our job was to bring facts to the meta-discourse around it. The key thing that we had to do was make the case that investments in coal were bad investments. We partnered with Mark Campanale from Carbon Tracker, who had introduced the concept of 'stranded assets'—investments that would lose value as the world transitioned to a low-carbon economy. We worked to make this idea well-known, not by placing it in outlets like *The Guardian*, but by targeting financial media such as *Reuters*, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, and *Bloomberg*. This helped introduce the idea into the conversations of long-term investors, particularly pension funds and sovereign wealth funds, where it made a significant impact.

Alec Saelens: Is it as simple as pitching individual journalists about the value of the story and creating a profile?

Tom Brookes: You're a journalist, you know how this works. You pick up the phone and understand what a journalist needs: a victim, a problem, something bad happening, or something good happening instead. You also need to acknowledge opposing views, showing there's honesty in good PR, which turns it into strategic communications. We work with the media by bringing fact-based discourse. You need robust ideas, good research, and a compelling narrative. You package that together and work it into the news agenda. For example, if a country announces a major coal investment, you quickly run an analysis on the asset risk. You send that to *The Financial Times*, and they publish a piece like, "Analysis shows Norwegian sovereign wealth fund risks \$3 trillion on a bad investment." That's a news story.

The Norwegian sovereign wealth fund is interesting because it's regulated by elected officials, making it easier to engage. Over time, they adopted a "coal screen," refusing to invest in companies heavily reliant on coal. That's huge because the Norwegian sovereign wealth fund is the largest in the world. When they step away from coal, it signals to other investors that coal is no longer a good investment.

Over time, coal is no longer seen as cheap and plentiful but as expensive and dangerous. The truth about coal hasn't changed, it was always bad, but the perception has. That's the kind of long-term work we need to focus on. Fossil fuel industries have spent years convincing the public that societies can't function without oil and gas, similar to the plastics ads we've seen

recently. There's one in the U.S. where a couple is told, "Without plastic, this hospital wouldn't function," which isn't true. There are sustainable alternatives, but this narrative is pushed—just like the old "tiger in your tank" or tobacco propaganda.

These industries have been doing this for decades, creating narratives that are hard to break. Our work is about showing the world that these things are not essential, that there are alternatives. Over time, we shift the perception, just like we've done with coal, showing that it's not the future. We need to keep pushing these kinds of stories to change the broader discourse.

Alec Saelens: I'm curious about the battle for public opinion. What is something that you've tried and realized that didn't work? What did you learn and how did you iterate on that failure?

Tom Brookes: One example was when we focused heavily on the science, believing that if we got more scientific voices into the media, it would counteract misinformation. We quickly realized this approach had limited impact. While it helped in some areas, it didn't address the broader issue.

Public opinion is battered every day by a million different messages. Everybody's worried about climate change broadly. Yet, global CO2 emissions continue to rise. This gap between public concern and policy action is due to power dynamics, interests, and discourse. Information alone isn't enough; you need to shift the balance of power to make a difference.

We learned that creating information isn't enough if it doesn't change power dynamics. There's a vast amount of information about climate change. In comparison, there's a relatively small amount of climate disinformation, but it's well targeted. We now conduct detailed power analyses to understand what we're trying to influence and how to enter those spaces. Convincing people isn't just about being right; it's about understanding the power dynamics at play. We've built strong digital and audience insights and polling operations. This data is shared broadly within the community to support the cause and the movement. That's a key lesson we've learned.

Alec Saelens: How do you strategically set up these operations, given they are so complicated?

Tom Brookes: There are a few important principles. One key principle is to build power. The term "build" is essential here. You actually have to build it. In our case, our primary asset is people. You need to find good people. I have a guiding phrase for GSCC: hire brilliant people and set them free. By this I don't mean letting them do whatever they want. I mean removing limitations

on their creativity so they can achieve the goals set for them. It's amazing what people can do when they don't have to worry about paying rent, they have the tools they need, and they have good colleagues to collaborate with.

You need to build structures designed entirely around impact. An institution's survival can become its primary objective. Once something is set up, its dissolution can become a frightening thought. We need to learn as a movement that investing in people and ensuring they're operating in a supportive environment is crucial.

Our funding comes entirely from philanthropy; we don't take corporate or government money. This means we work with relatively short-term grants, which can be challenging. I often shield my team from the stress of our financial fragility, although it can still affect them. Change is created through a combination of interventions. What we build is an ecosystem of change; there's never a silver bullet. Anyone claiming they have "the one and only plan" to achieve a specific outcome is essentially misleading.

Alec Saelens: One of the fundamental points we make about solutions journalism is that you can't present any single solution as the ultimate fix that will just revolutionize something. If you don't apply a critical lens and understand that whatever response is being put in place is only one piece of a larger set of elements that work together, you are missing the point.

Tom Brookes: Exactly. When working to achieve change—whether in child protection, climate change, gender equity, or human rights—we must avoid getting distracted by the notion that similar entities are competitors. In reality, the focus should be on collaboration. Collaboration and generosity are essential. You need to approach interactions with your community with trust and a collaborative spirit. Unfortunately, our funding model sometimes fosters a sense of competition for resources, which is counterproductive. It's crucial to have community members who value deep collaboration because it is fundamental to success.

We absolutely cannot win any of these battles without scale. People often praise our work, and I am humbled to lead GSCC and work with such remarkable individuals. But much of our work involves relentless effort and strategic insight. It's a continuous grind. In climate action, for instance, progress can seem slow. We may not see dramatic improvements, but our work remains crucial. It's tough, and the psychological toll is significant.

I can't claim to have done everything perfectly. The good bits were likely due to somebody else's innovations, while the mistakes are probably mine. We began developing GSCC's values back in

2017, and they are still very much alive today. These values guide our interactions with colleagues and our global network. Since we operate collaboratively, these principles are crucial.

We set principles that you'd expect, such as respect and inclusivity, but also agility and a focus on impact. We're fast on our feet, we don't hang around. We have a values team within GSCC that rotates members over time, ensuring these principles are actively maintained. This team advises on new processes and helps keep our values central to our work. Investing in people is crucial. Designing systems that allow people to move around within the network. This is feasible for us due to our diverse operations, but it's more challenging for smaller groups.

Now, because GSCC has many different types of operations, that's something that we can do. If you're a tiny NGO, that's impossible, because you've got 10 people and they've all got a job and that's it. I do think that as movements, we've got to think about how we look after people. When staff members leave for other roles in the movement, it strengthens the ecosystem of change. That's just great work. We should think about that all the time because it's not one organization versus another. It is a network of collaboration.

Resilience is crucial. Movements need to invest in infrastructure that supports their people, and funders play a role too. If a big funder is invested in a space, they should consider paying for coaches with experience in the field to support those working in that space when needed. These kinds of investments in people are critical because, without them, the work can feel draining and extractive.

I'd love to tell everyone at GSCC to work 38- or 40-hour weeks, but that's not realistic. Honestly, it's not what I want either—I want them to go out and win. But we need to create the right conditions for that, so they can continue working effectively. This means giving them the ability to take time out when necessary and ensuring there are support structures in place to look after them. If we focus on both the people and the strategy, we can succeed.

Alec Saelens: On an institutional level, when different organizations tackle the same larger issue in their own ways, and competition can arise due to the funding landscape, how do you create an ecosystem-wide strategic vision and help everyone understand their role in changing the system?

Tom Brookes: I don't have a perfect answer, but I think it's a leadership responsibility. Leaders of organizations need to model that behavior. You can push it down into an organization; you can create a culture. As the old saying goes, "a fish rots from the head." Leadership does set the

culture. If the leaders within a sector are seen collaborating closely, consulting each other, and speaking respectfully about each other, it sends a message to their teams: "We work with these people, they are partners to us, I value their opinions, and I spend time building relationships." That will definitely percolate down.

I think it's really vital work. Not to suggest that everybody always gets it right—it's easy to get distracted by internal issues or the latest funding crisis, which is tough. But I do think it's something that leadership must focus on.

Alec Saelens: This was a fascinating conversation. Thank you so much for your time and all of these insights.

Alec Saelens is a former journalist who supports SJN and its partners track solutions journalism's impact on society and the industry. In his former role, he researched and consulted on the connection between solutions journalism and revenue. He is co-founder of The Bristol Cable, the UK's pioneering local media cooperative. Before SJN, he was a researcher and coach for the Membership Puzzle Project and an analyst for NewsGuard.

***This conversation has been edited and condensed.*