INTERVIEW

The newspapers and glossy magazines have dined out lavishly on the peccadilloes of the Goldsmith family for decades. The late tycoon Sir James Goldsmith was rarely out of the headlines — and *Private Eye*, which he sued relentlessly — as he swashbuckled his way to his fortune. He launched the Referendum Party before dying of pancreatic cancer in 1997, aged 64.

Next, Jemima became the darling of the press with her ill-fated marriage to cricketer icon Imran Kahn, and these days the paparazzi do a sunshine business out of her "holi-daying" romance with Hugh Grant.

On a more serious profile trajectory is Zac, particularly since Tory leader David Cameron appointed him as No.2 on the Quality of Life task force to research environmental issues in preparation to adopt them into the party's manifesto.

Zac is aboard after years of green campaigning, not least through *The Ecologist* magazine, which he edits, owns and financially props up.

Eton-educated Zac inherited a fortune estimated by the papers at anything from £10 to 300 million. But he is no playboy. Now 31, he is a married father of three with a home in Chelsea and an organic farm in Devon.

We meet at *The Ecologist*'s tatty and cramped offices in an old warehouse office block by the river in Chelsea. Foam spews out of the meeting-room chairs. Zac, in a white shirt fraying slightly at the cuffs, is pinched-eyed after a sleepless night caring for an unwell child. He is diffident, faultlessly polite and speaks in a gentle, cut-glass voice that moves at a nervously accelerated pace. He drags intermittently on roll ups — Golden Virginia deftly rolled in Rizla Blues into immaculate mini cones that would make any Rasta proud.

The newspapers have always had a fascination with your family. When were you first aware of it and what was your father’s view?

I don't remember a time of not being aware of media presence. At prep school I heard things that my father was doing from teachers and not really knowing what was going on, just that he was a person people talked about. There was not a lot of interest in me until I got involved in certain issues. It was always limited to the very marginal gossip columns and I could have kept it that way, but I took the decision to be more in the public.

My father took a view later in his life not to be more public. That annoys me, but you can't spend time sleeping over it. Very occasionally, I will write a letter, that it will be forgotten tomorrow, so I just don't lose sleep over it. Very occasionally, I will write a letter, but not out of arrogance, just to put the record straight. I find it more annoying if I do an interview and what I have said is deliberately used out of context. That annoys me, but you can’t spend time obsessing on these things. Stories are printed about me because someone feels people want to read them. The positive flip-side is that if I want to raise the profile of a particular issue, or promote *The Ecologist*, it is the same dynamic that allows me to do that. We have access to the media, so I see it as a two-way street and part of the bargain you make. If I do an interview with the Daily Mail, then it is not surprising if something later appears in a gossip column that is not true, but you can't complain about it.

But what do you think when a story is totally untrue or misleading? I read recently that your family are worried about your poker playing. Is that so?

No, not at all. I remember that one and I am glad you mention it. There was a detailed description of how I lost £100,000 in one hand of poker. It was re-printed in three or four papers and was just totally false. I didn't respond, but probably should have because you do not want to appear cavalier with money. I would prefer for that not to have been printed.

Do you take a similar tough stance when it comes to the press?

I have actually never reacted because you lose a lot of time and energy. If something appears you don’t like, you bring it to the attention of more people by going to court. Unless my integrity was really seriously questioned, or something particularly horrific was published, only then would I go to court. I am always expecting to fight through the courts for *The Ecologist*, but on a personal level I would make that the neutron button, which I would really hope not to ever push.

I don't think the coverage I get is that negative. If I prefer for that not to have been printed. I would prefer for that not to have been printed. If something later appears in a gossip column that is not true, you can't complain about it.

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I think John Humphrys is wonderful. I like Jon Snow on Newsnight. I like to watch Question Time — but not appearing on it! I have been on two or three times. It is a nightmare to do. You go on hoping that your issues are going to come up, but the last time I was asked about stuff that is not part of my agenda. I am no more qualified to talk about crime or education than anyone else, so as a result it becomes a survival exercise. I got home before the programme had finished broadcasting — I had forgotten it didn’t live — and my wife was watching it. I recited at the sight of me and couldn’t bear to watch.

In that story, I was meant to have gone to the Clermont Club, but at that time, I had never even stepped foot in there. After that I was interested — and now I am a member. I absolutely love playing poker. I play with friends, but it is more of a social thing than gambling. I never have played cash poker, which is when things become dangerous because you can lose anything.

If you were to forensically go through most of the articles printed about me or someone I know, you will find that most are based on information that is entirely false. I would love to know what process the journalists go through who write this stuff. Is it false information from someone making a back, or is it total fabrication on the part of a lazy journalists?

But how about your wider family — Jemima, for example, and Imran Kahn and her relationship with Hugh Grant. They get a tough time.

There are times when I would have thought my life was made more difficult by the press. It’s just the way it is in this country. I think the British press has got a lot to answer for generally. I take something I read with a pinch of salt and assume most of what I read isn’t true. As for Hugh, to talk about him is a non-starter. He is living his private life. It is nothing that I will comment on.

There is no financial incentive to misbehave, so it is not a demand for it. I am taking advantage of a new identity and my goal is help that identity form.

The whole point of the magazine is to not back down, to not back out, to not back away. The magazine is selling around 30,000 at the front, so feel free to pull a product placement. We can’t take. That is our job. The idea of backing down is the end of any business at all.

To what extent might you have been influenced by the magazine? I have got a number of staff who are absolutely brilliant and I have got a number of staff who are just not up to scratch and I have got to keep them there. So sometimes it is the other way around and sometimes it is not. But I do not think it is the magazine’s fault.

I think that is a nonsense. I have just not been able to find anyone who has been able to make this thing work. It has been a nightmare to do. You go on hoping that the magazine will get picked up. If it is on-side with an issue, there is no paper more relevant. If it is not on-side, there is no paper more irrelevant. If it is not on-side with the Daily Mail. When it was focusing on GM foods it moved that agenda dramatically. The Telegraph does a fantastic job on food and farming. The Guardian is good and The Independent is well ahead of the game. It has broken all the rules with its uncompromising covers.

The Ecologist was founded by your uncle Teddy in 1970. How was your entry into journalism? I started doing little local pieces in late 1997, like the letters and reviews pages, but then the organisation running the magazine collapsed and the team fell apart. I was the only one left standing, so I went from reviews editor to editor in about two months. I had no journalistic background, I was totally unqualified, so it was deep-end stuff. But back then the magazine was not all that serious and only had about 2,000 readers. If it had been a bigger operation I would probably not have done it because I would have thought, I can’t write, I can’t edit, I can’t design, I’m going to fuck this up.

I published a big story on the American GM food company Monsanto in 1998 and it triggered a massive reaction. It caused a big storm and really got the magazine noticed. It was basically just me and an assistant at the time, and it nearly killed me. I was under so much pressure and survived on two hours sleep for about four months. I was going mad. After that I started building the team to take the magazine forward.

How well is the magazine doing now? It is in that privileged position where it doesn’t need to make a profit. What is the reality of it as a business and the contribution you have to make financially? I pay a salary and I pay a small amount into the magazine every year. The Ecologist doesn’t make money, but it could do potentially because it is growing. The Ecologist is growing. The amount I put in varies and it doesn’t make money, but it could do potentially. I think it is growing. It has to grow. It has to make some money. I think the magazine is well ahead in terms of readers and sales.

The magazine is selling around 80,000 at the front and there are 2,000 people on our mailing list in Spain, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. There is also an Arabic edition and an English edition in India. There is nothing much I can do about it, but we have done some tests and the reaction is the best we have had anywhere. However, to launch in America requires such commitment — and we are not ready yet.

The whole point of the magazine is to not back down from an issue. We don’t have shareholders nagging away at us to behave in a certain way, so we can take risks that other newspapers and magazines can’t take. That is our job. The idea of backing down in order to protect the magazine just doesn’t figure. If the magazine is bankrupted through a backfired risk, then I think it is a disaster and it’s something we would have to live with.

Obviously we are not going to change the world at The Ecologist, but if stuff that the Ecologist gets reprinted in the mainstream media has had some chance of having an impact, the magazine is useful. If it did not have a name I would not do it. I believe in the magazine. I like it and I think it has a role that is changing and growing. But at its heart it is the same as it always has been.