# To: Editor-in-Chief Geoffrey North

From: Donald Kroodsma

Re: Two editorial issues, 1) Scientific Integrity, 2) Conflict-of-Interest

Dear Editor-in-Chief Geoffrey North:

Might I suggest that you consider two editorial policy issues for Current Biology?

1) On Scientific Integrity (excerpt from letter to Dr. Maderspacher, 14 February 2020):

Have the editors of Current Biology ever considered having authors declare not only that the submitted paper wasn't published elsewhere, that the data are theirs to publish, etc., but also that the paper adheres to the strictest terms of what Feynman calls scientific integrity? that data conflicting with the proposed interpretation haven't been omitted, that opposing views are presented, so that the reader is offered, well, something with a basis in reality rather than an opinion piece?

I think that addressing the issue directly with each potential author, upon submission of a manuscript, might help strengthen the articles published in Current Biology.

2) Limiting Conflict of Interest:

And if a rebuttal arrives claiming to refute a published paper in Current Biology, have that rebuttal evaluated by an editor and reviewers other than those who accepted the paper in the first place.

If #1 had been in place, I do not believe that Podos and Cohn-Haft (2019) could have been honestly submitted for publication in Current Biology.

And if #2 had been the policy, a lot of time and effort tainted by conflict-of-interest would not have been wasted in unfairly evaluating my rebuttal, which asked “Is scientific integrity optional?”

Thank you for all of your efforts as a gate-keeper for science.

(Some of the correspondence that I have had with Dr. Florian Maderspacher is provided.)

Sincerely . . . Donald Kroodsma

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# REVIEWER 5—A review of the 4 Current Biology reviews: Two significant problems

(An outside review of the 4 reviews provided by Current Biology, by a prominent, senior scientist who studies the sexual selection literature—my italics, and my organizing subtitles).

. . . very interesting, if a little dispiriting. I feel there are two significant problems with the package that you sent me.

## 1) Conflict of interest, by editors and reviewers

*It’s good that the Current Biology editor responded* *and took your inquiry seriously, but too bad that she had the original reviewers do the assessment, as they have the same conflict of interest that an editor has, in that they signed off on the article and look bad if they admit endorsing something fraudulent.* Also, the vehemence of some of the comments suggests that some of the reviewers are Podos' friends, perhaps unsurprising since authors can suggest reviewers.

All four reviewers reveal that they don’t have a filter for distinguishing science from “story time” (Gelman’s term: <https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2010/10/15/story_time/>), suggesting that stories dominate their own work as well, and who’s going to admit that? These kinds of publications are all too rampant in the sexual selection literature. Other than relying on the opinions of the authors themselves, it seems to me that you’ve been given the “unfairest hearing possible.” Too bad the editor did not act on your suggestion to have neutral experts evaluate your claims.

[14 February 2020 letter to Current Biology, inserted here by Kroodsma:]

[If you seek an outside arbiter, you will have trouble finding someone who can weigh these issues objectively. One of Podos’ collaborators told me just yesterday that my concerns about scientific integrity were “your prerogative,” as if scientific integrity were an option for a scientist.]

[The last editor to deal with these issues told me he had to go to Europe to find reviewers for the topic. You might consult Dr. Michael Beecher at the Univ. of Washington if you wanted to find arbiters who were not part of the network of collaborators for Podos and his academic lineage (email address: [beecher@uw.edu](mailto:beecher@uw.edu)).]

2) Podos and Cohn-Haft provide an excellent example of “story time”; and, yes, scientific integrity is optional  
  
*The responses really reveal the potency of an expert practitioner of "story time."* The reviewers make a big point of emphasizing that the main accomplishment of the research was to measure the amplitude of the songs. But the story peddled in the article of course implied that something much more momentous had been accomplished. And so did the publicity; I certainly don't recall any headlines saying "Researchers measure exactly how loud a loud song is." Nor are there quotes of the authors modestly explaining that all they did was make some interesting measurements.

The contradiction is revealed in comments by the same reviewers who said the paper was just about measurement, because they also claim the paper is "about" sexual selection, even though the authors did not measure or test anything related to sexual selection. They just measured amplitude, and then wrote some sexual selection story time. The reviewers don't even notice that even as they claim that your complaints are bogus because Podos and Cohn-Haft don't claim priority on anything except a few measurements; the reviewers are unwittingly swallowing the whole extravagant story about female choice and sexual selection. Remarkably, reviewer 2 even thinks that Podos and Cohn-Haft tested a hypothesis. Story time trumps evidence and scientific integrity every time, at least when done skillfully, and Podos is one of the best at withholding conflicting information from reviewers so as to create his preferred story. (I recall that in his Animal Behaviour response to you he even stated how he chose every word carefully to create the best effect.)

## More on “story time”

The idea of “story time” probably needs a little elaboration. Here’s a quote from one of Gelman’s blogs:

’Story time’ … We also see it in journal articles all the time. It’s that all-too-quick moment when the authors pivot from the causal estimates they’ve proved, to their speculations, which . . . are ‘no more credible than anybody else’s story’. Maybe less credible, in fact, because researchers can fool themselves into thinking they’ve proved something when they haven’t (<https://statmodeling.stat.columbia.edu/2010/10/15/story_time/>).

It’s fascinating to see when Podos and Cohn-Haft hit the pivot on making this all about sexual selection instead of measuring loudness. It’s there in the *third word of the title*, “mating,” driven home in the first two words of the text, “Sexual selection.” The last sentence is about “sexual selection’s power to drive evolution . . .” There is no pivot point. From beginning to end, this is a story about sexual selection, wrapped around some numbers about how loud the sounds are.

*But the story is arbitrary.* Equally truthful (or untruthful, depending on your perspective) is the title ***Extremely loud non-mating songs at close range in white bellbirds***. Then the entire story could have been built on males visiting each other’s perches, experiencing the loud songs at close range, omitting completely any reference to the fact that females also visit male perches. I have no doubt that all four reviewers, all “experts” in the study of sexual selection, would have rejected such a story (unanimously, unequivocally) on the simple grounds that the females’ visits were not mentioned. And rightly so, just as the Podos and Cohn-Haft paper should have been rejected for omitting mention of male visits.

## Whole truths, half truths, half lies

The reviewers object to talking about truth, at one point calling your comments slanderous, but the ideas of “whole truths” and “half truths” resonate with any reasonable person. I think your omission #2 is most important, so let me address that.

The whole truth. The whole truth is that male and female bellbirds alike (white bellbird or three-wattled bellbird) visit the calling perches of males and appear to be blown away by the intensely loud sounds.

The half truth. Female bellbirds visit perches and are blown away (readers are not told about male visits).

The half lie. Associated with every half truth is, by definition, the “half lie,” the information that has been concealed to make the half truth seem to be the whole truth. The half lie here, which is concealing information about male visits to calling perches of other males, is essential for enabling the story about females and sexual selection. Any reader who is told of the male visits would say something like, “Wow, if males do this too, then the female sexual selection story seems pretty concocted and incomplete.” The half lie deceives readers and misrepresents the biology of the bellbirds.

I feel I ought to debunk more of the reviewers’ comments, but it’s really not worth it (though you probably should). It’s the big picture that all four reviewers miss, with plenty of statements showing that they are completely taken in by the story.

If I were editor, what would I do? Tough situation, given it’s gone this far, but this kind of story time masquerading as science undermines all scientists, as you have written in Animal Behaviour. In the end I think I’d overrule all four reviewers and retract the paper, as a lesson to the authors and other story tellers, if nothing else. But nobody will ever ask me to be an editor at Current Biology.

# REVIEWS 1-4 from Current Biology—with a few Kroodsma comments

## REVIEWER 1—“complaint is unfounded”

After reading the complaint, the literature cited therein, and the original paper published in Current Biology, I conclude that the complaint is unfounded.

Re. Omission 1: The “critical literature” that was allegedly omitted are actually anecdotal reports that do not present any calibrated amplitude data. What the author of the complaint doesn’t seem to understand is that value of the publication is the quantification of the behavior (i.e. the calibrated amplitude measurements).

Kroodsma: I do understand that. But the publication is built on a *STORY*, and a story of half truths at that.

Re. Omission 2: The author of the complaint has a different view on how to interpret the finding of the publication. The focus of the publication is on an ultimate issue (sexual selection) whereas the author of the complaint letter prefers a proximate view (vocal learning). This is not an omission but a focus on a different topic.

Kroodsma: No, I don’t prefer a proximate view. I prefer the whole view, the whole truth.

Re. Omission 3: This accusation is unwarranted. The anatomical details of the avian ear not essential here, the crucial point is that birds are less vulnerable to acoustic overexposure than mammals, which is clearly stated (and correctly referenced) in the paper.

Kroodsma: Fact check. “the crucial point . . . in the paper.” I challenge anyone to find where this information is found in the Podos and Cohn-Haft publication. It’s not there. I don’t know where this reviewer is getting his information. Blatant errors like this seriously undermine credibility.

## REVIEWER 2—"unsubstantiated complaints”

I’ve had a careful read of Kroodsma’s complaint, as well as some of the references he believes should have been cited, and the original Podos & Cohn-Haft paper again. I believe these are all completely unsubstantiated complaints.

I’ll address them in turn:

“Omission 1”

This is the one complaint of the three that seemed to have merit on the surface. However, neither Snow nor Kroodsma actually measured the vocal amplitudes or the distances from the listener to the caller. The “excruciatingly loud” description is likely accurate but is also entirely anecdotal in these papers.

Further, while Podos & Cohn-Haft did not cite Snow 1977 nor Snow 1973, they did cite Snow’s later monograph (1983) on the Cotingas, which I have confirmed does review the relevant behavioural information contained in the above two. Podos & Cohn-Haft cite Snow’s book several times, correctly acknowledging that these behavioural observations had been previously made, and they now quantify them in a less anecdotal way. The citation of the Snow book seems more than enough given the constraints of the 10-citation list for the CB format. In addition, the complainant seems to miss the point that the novelty and strength of the Podo & Cohn-Haft study is the careful sound measurements, which have rarely been done in the field for any species.

I have re-read the Kroodsma et al 2013 work on vocal learning in the bellbirds, and while there are some anecdotal descriptions of these behaviour in there too, it is neither the main thrust of this publication nor does it contain data on behaviours that are not already described in the Snow Publications (as it deals primarily with other bellbirds, and their vocal changes over time).  I see no scientific reason that this publication should have been cited, particularly given the brief format.

Kroodsma: Reviewer seems to think this is a citation game, and if a work is cited, the authors are covered by everything in that publication. My point is that male visits are not mentioned in Podos and Cohn-Haft, not that certain papers weren’t cited.

 “Omission 2”

This complaint is entirely off topic. That Podos & Cohn-Haft chose to focus their study on sexual selection rather than Kroodsma’s preferred topic of vocal learning (or not) is just a matter of what hypothesis they chose to test, and which question they found more compelling or interesting. This is the equivalent of writing a complaint about a clinical test of a Covid-19 vaccine because it didn’t test whether the vaccine would be suitable for treating HIV?

Kroodsma: No hypothesis was tested. No questions were asked. An arbitrary story was told about sexual selection, with some numbers embedded in the story. (Last sentence is ridiculous.)

Podos & Cohn-Haft make no claim that males never visit singing perches of other males, rather only report what they observed. The suggestion that they purposefully omit other observations strikes me as slanderous, especially in the absence of any actual proof that they did so? This accusation would need to be made by someone who was there in the forest, observing that Podos & Cohn-Haft were ignoring or disregarding a sub-set of observations.

Kroodsma: Apparently this reviewer is confusing his personal communications with the authors with what is published. This is somewhat of a trivial point, but I never wrote that the authors denied that they saw males visiting the perches of other males. I did say that the authors knew that males visited the perches, based on the literature they would have read, and they chose not to reveal the male visits to readers. As I have written above, that would have undermined the chosen story. It seems that the reviewer feels it is ok to omit information as long as one doesn’t deny that information is being withheld.

Let’s talk about ethical behavior in publishing. I have illustrated how Podos et al. routinely omit crucial information from their publications that would undermine the chosen story line (Kroodsma 2017a reference in “complaint”). An entirely false literature has been built up, for example, on birdsong performance, all based on omissions, with Podos as the key to it all. Those publications lack scientific integrity. Intentionally withholding conflicting information is considered, in most scientific circles, fraudulent, as readers are deceived into believing one set of results and interpretations when another explanation or admission should have been forthcoming.

And, yes, I believe Podos would do anything to protect his stories, and he basically has. It’s pretty difficult imagining someone doing more than he has, as detailed on my website: <http://donaldkroodsma.com/performance>.

“Omission 3”

Once again, I believe this is off topic. Ironically, to make his argument, the complainant selectively quotes Dooling et al (2019) to claim that Podos & Cohn-Haft are making selective omissions of the literature in order to sell their story?  In their review, Dooling et al explicitly state that sound pressure levels such as those measured by Podos & Cohn-Haft cause temporary (TTS) or potentially permanent (PTS) hearing loss in birds in the lab.

The complaint is further unwarranted, as it not necessary to go into details of avian ear anatomy. Podos & Cohn-Haft use clear and careful language in discussing the potential for hearing damage, and do not state anything that is a “mistruth” or “half-truth” or even an over-reach in interpretation. They did not test nor measure hearing damage, only use existing published values from careful work of Dooling and others to state that it may be a potential hazard for the females. This is true and as much as one can say about it without follow-up studies.

Kroodsma: Fact check. Again, I don’t know where reviewers get their information. There is no reference to any of Dooling’s work in Podos and Cohn-Haft publication or supplementary material.

## REVIEWER 3—"omissions . . . trivial and unworthy . . .”

I think the omissions cited by Kroodsma are trivial and unworthy of published correction. Procnias triacarunculata and P. alba are sister species. In my experience, alba is very clearly the louder of the two species. So, statements in the paper like "We know of no other species..." are technically wrong, but trivial since tricarunculata is the sister species of alba. The loud vocalizations and behaviors are homologous, and therefore only trivially different.

The issue of song learning in Procnias, which the authors do ignore, is not actually relevant to the topic of their paper. So, not an omission of consequence.

Kroodsma repeatedly cites his 2013 paper in his complaint, but I note that it merely describes the calls as "intensely loud" and makes no comments about distance between birds. So it doesn't really back up his assertions.

Kroodsma: I did not say that song learning is relevant; I did say what males might be doing when they approach closely (i.e., song learning). What is important is that males visit calling perches just as females do, with all of the same ritualized antics, and if one didn’t study the plumage of the visiting bird, one probably wouldn’t know whether the visitor was male or female.

The issue of the potential ear damage is simply an hypothesis raised by Podos and Cohn-Haft as an interesting consequence of song volume. They simply raise the prospect of ear damage, and do not conclude that is happening or how it happens. Yes, avian ears are different, but the relevant issue appears to be an ongoing capacity to grow near hair cells in their cochlea (Dooling et al 2019). But this is not a contradiction to any issues raised by Podos and Cohn-Haft.

## REVIEWER 4—“allegations largely baseless and irrelevant”

As per your request I have reviewed the allegations posed by Dr. Kroodsma and reread the paper in question by Podos and Cohn-Haft.  I find these allegations largely baseless and irrelevant to the scientific aims of the paper.  While a more extensive paper format might have allowed for the inclusion of some of the previous literature referred to by Kroodsma, their absence has little bearing on the accomplishments of the study (accurately measuring sound levels of free-flying tropical birds) nor their interesting implications for animal communication and sexual selection.

Kroodsma: Curiously, no reviewers address matters of “scientific integrity,” which is the key to everything I address. Current Biology must have been selective in what was sent to the reviewers. That’s too bad.

# CURRENT BIOLOGY REJECTS KROODSMA “COMPLAINT”

Dear Don,

Again apologies for the long delay in getting back to you. It took me a while to herd all four original reviewers of the paper together and get them to assess your complaint. Their responses, which I have discussed with my colleagues on the editorial team, are pasted below.

As you will see, they all regard the missing citations/references you mentioned in your message as non-essential and found no fault with the cited literature in the paper (while taking into account that the format itself is sadly constrained to 10 citations).

Given these unequivocal responses, we see no reason to take this further and now regard this case as closed. We feel strongly that we have given your case the fairest hearing possible and kindly ask you to accept this as our final word in this matter.

Sincerely,

Florian

# COVER LETTER TO CURRENT BIOLOGY, 25 July 2020

Hello Florian:

I know you want this case closed, and you want me to go away. Sorry, but I cannot accept that dismissal outright. I am too much of a scientist.

Given how you chose your four reviewers, I took the liberty of obtaining a fifth review. Reviewer 5 addresses the issues eloquently, I believe, better than I could have.

Some of Reviewer 5’s main points:

1) Podos and Cohn-Haft provide a prime example of “Story Time”: The entire paper, from beginning to end, is built on a (sexy) story about female choice and sexual selection, without any data on the topic.

2) And the story is built on a half truth, which relies on a half lie (concealing information from readers) to sell the story.

3) And the story is entirely arbitrary, as someone could use the same measurement data to write an equally (un)truthful article on the half lie, entitled *Extremely loud* ***non-mating*** *songs* . . .

4) Readers are deceived, as the story misrepresents reality.

5) Podos is a serial offender, *always* concealing information from readers that would undermine the chosen story.

6) Retract the paper.

I go back to my initial inquiry with Current Biology, 14 February 2020. If such a policy mentioned below were in place, and authors honestly adhered to it, I don’t think that you and I would have had these exchanges about Podos and Cohn-Haft’s paper.

Have the editors of Current Biology ever considered having authors declare not only that the submitted paper wasn't published elsewhere, that the data are theirs to publish, etc., but also that the paper adheres to the strictest terms of what Feynman calls scientific integrity? that data conflicting with the proposed interpretation haven't been omitted, that opposing views are presented, so that the reader is offered, well, something with a basis in reality rather than an opinion piece?

I think that addressing the issue directly with each potential author, upon submission of a manuscript, might help strengthen the articles published in Current Biology.

I’m disappointed in the process used to evaluate my inquiry and disappointed in what the story-telling experts in the field of sexual selection have to say. I would like to expect more of Current Biology.

Kind regards . . . Don Kroodsma

# RESPONSE FROM CURRENT BIOLOGY, 3 AUGUST 2020

Dear Don,

I have sent your piece in its entirety, nothing was edited.

As mentioned before, we have given this matter the utmost attention and I must ask you now in the kindest way possible that you let it rest. An inordinate amount of time and energy has been spent on this. My job is to serve the scientific community, our readers and authors, and there is only so much time and energy I can devote to each individual issue. That allotment has been far exceeded in your case and I therefore cannot engage in further discussion on the matter.

Sincerely,

Florian

# GOOD-BYE FROM KROODSMA, 3 AUGUST 2020

Hello Florian:

Yes, I understand that responding to my concerns on scientific integrity have taken some time. Thank you for your efforts, but I do feel it unfortunate that your “utmost attention” was so tainted by conflict-of-interest, especially by the problem of reviewer choices that I had alerted you to. I do not believe that the scientific community has been served well.

Please don’t respond to this. Let it rest. I’m saying good-bye.

Sincerely . . . Donald Kroodsma