Every now and then a scholarly journal retracts an article because of errors or outright fraud. In academic circles, and sometimes beyond, each retraction is a big deal.

Now comes word of a journal retracting 60 articles at once.

The reason for the mass retraction is mind-blowing: A “peer review and citation ring” was apparently rigging the review process to get articles published.

You’ve heard of prostitution rings, gambling rings and extortion rings. Now there’s a “peer review ring.”

The publication is the Journal of Vibration and Control (JVC). It publishes papers with names like “Hydraulic engine mounts: a survey” and “Reduction of wheel force variations with magnetorheological devices.”

The field of acoustics covered by the journal is highly technical:

Analytical, computational and experimental studies of vibration phenomena and their control. The scope encompasses all linear and nonlinear vibration phenomena and covers topics such as: vibration and control of structures and machinery, signal analysis, aeroelasticity, neural networks, structural control and acoustics, noise and noise control, waves in solids and fluids and shock waves.

JVC is part of the SAGE group of academic publications.

Here’s how it describes its peer review process:

[The journal] operates under a conventional single-blind reviewing policy in which the reviewer’s name is always concealed from the submitting author.
All manuscripts are reviewed initially by one of the Editors and only those papers that meet the scientific and editorial standards of the journal, and fit within the aims and scope of the journal, will be sent for peer review. Generally, reviews from two independent referees are required.

An announcement from SAGE published July 8 explained what happened, albeit somewhat opaquely.

In 2013, the editor of JVC, Ali H. Nayfeh, became aware of people using “fabricated identities” to manipulate an online system called SAGE Track by which scholars review the work of other scholars prior to publication.

Attention focused on a researcher named Peter Chen of the National Pingtung University of Education (NPUE) in Taiwan and “possibly other authors at this institution.”

After a 14-month investigation, JVC determined the ring involved “aliases” and fake e-mail addresses of reviewers — up to 130 of them — in an apparently successful effort to get friendly reviews of submissions and as many articles published as possible by Chen and his friends. “On at least one occasion, the author Peter Chen reviewed his own paper under one of the aliases he created,” according to the SAGE announcement.

The statement does not explain how something like this happens. Did the ring invent names and say they were scholars? Did they use real names and pretend to be other scholars? Doesn’t anyone check on these things by, say, picking up the phone and calling the reviewer?

In any case, SAGE and Nayfeh confronted Chen to give him an “opportunity to address the accusations of misconduct,” the statement said, but were not satisfied with his responses.

In May, “NPUE informed SAGE and JVC that Peter Chen had resigned from his post on 2 February 2014.”

Each of the 60 retracted articles had at least one author and/or one reviewer “who has been implicated in the peer review” ring, said a separate notice issued by JVC.

Efforts by The Washington Post to locate and contact Chen for comment were unsuccessful.

The whole story is described in a publication called “Retraction Watch” under the headline: “SAGE Publications busts ‘peer review and citation ring.’”

“This one,” it said, “deserves a ‘wow.’”

Update: Some additional information from the SAGE statement: “As the SAGE investigation drew to a close, in May 2014 Professor Nayfeh’s retirement was announced and he resigned his position as Editor-in-Chief of JVC….Three senior editors and an additional 27 associate editors with expertise and prestige in the field have been appointed to assist with the day-to-day running of the JVC peer review process. Following Professor Nayfeh’s retirement announcement, the external senior editorial team will be responsible for independent editorial control for JVC.”
Peer review, says an explanation for budding young scientists on the Web site of the University of California-Berkeley, “does the same thing for science that the ‘inspected by #7’ sticker does for your t-shirt: provides assurance that someone who knows what they’re doing has double-checked it.”

It “is at the heart of the processes of not just medical journals but of all of science,” Richard Smith, a prominent editor of a major academic publishing house has written. “It is the method by which grants are allocated, papers published, academics promoted, and Nobel prizes won. …When something is peer reviewed it is in some sense blessed.”

He went on to describe the flaws of the process, which he said are numerous and generally well known to academics.

The editor looks at the title of the paper and sends it to two friends whom the editor thinks know something about the subject. If both advise publication the editor sends it to the printers. If both advise against publication the editor rejects the paper. If the reviewers disagree the editor sends it to a third reviewer and does whatever he or she advises. This pastiche—which is not far from systems I have seen used—is little better than tossing a coin, because the level of agreement
between reviewers on whether a paper should be published is little better than you’d expect by chance.

His list did not include what has unfolded at a publication called the *Journal of Vibration and Control*, perhaps because there may have been nothing quite like it.

On Thursday, *The Washington Post reported* that the academic journal had retracted 60 “scholarly” papers after discovering a “peer review ring” that had rigged the vetting process designed to insure the value and integrity of published research. The story was first reported by an online publication called *Retraction Watch* after the group that operates the journal, SAGE, announced the results of an investigation. While the journal involved, which covers acoustics, is a bit obscure, the scandal may very well go down in academic history as one of the most brazen on record.

Today, Daniel Sherman, the spokesman for SAGE, which operates about 700 other journals, provided some additional detail by e-mail in response to questions from The Post.

The scam described by the *Journal of Vibration and Control* revolved around a physicist at the National Pingtung University of Education (NPUE) in Taiwan, Peter Chen, who allegedly used fake e-mail addresses, fabricated identities and phony reviews to get the 60 papers past the peer review process at the journal and Control and into publication. Chen has not surfaced recently, according to SAGE. He was unavailable for comment.

Some of the reviews recommending the papers for publication were written by the physicist himself using the names of others at genuine academic institutions, the journal says. Some, the SAGE spokesman said, were written by others, and no academic affiliation was provided, just the name of a country.

Said Sherman:

In some instances real academic names were used and we believe email addresses were set up for assumed and fabricated identities at genuine institutions. We have proof from one academic confirming his identity was used and a gmail account set up in his name. Affiliations were used for some of the recommended reviewers (others just had countries listed) but we do not have verification that these people were working at these institutions. A lot of the reviewers simply have Taiwanese or Chinese addresses and no affiliations.

Some of the reviews were written in as little as two minutes, from start to finish. They were quickies, some “templated,” the spokesman said.

And some of the articles that got published, in addition to listing the physicist as the author, listed real scholars who had nothing to do with the papers. “We believe some of the co-authors may be innocent parties as they may not have had anything to do with the submission process or may not have known they were co-authors on the papers,” said Sherman.
The scheme began to unravel, SAGE and the Journal said in statements, on July 8 when journal editors discovered Chen using aliases in SAGE’s computerized review system. It unraveled further when e-mails sent to all the addresses of reviewers elicited no response.

Sherman:

We believe real people were involved, but it is not clear how many. We contacted all 130 names, but we did not receive a response from any of these individuals to verify their identity.

The big question here: How did all this manage to escape the notice of the editor of the Journal of Vibration and Control? “Templated” reviews? Hundreds of Gmail addresses instead of addresses from university accounts? None of the reviewers using an ID number under the ORCID system used by SAGE and other publications to identify legitimate scholars?

SAGE uses a platform called ScholarOne for processing manuscript submission and peer reviews. But, said Sherman, “anyone is able to create an account on ScholarOne. In these days of faceless Internet interaction it is relatively easy to do, however the system still relies on an editor to verify the account if used in peer review. It is not possible for us to verify the real identity of the individual or individuals setting up accounts.”

The JVC editor at the time, Professor Ali H. Nayfeh, is no longer with the publication. He has retired. SAGE said that “three senior editors and an additional 27 associate editors with expertise and prestige in the field have been appointed to assist with the day-to-day running of the JVC peer review process.”

Chen, meanwhile, has not been located, either by the Post or by The Journal or by Sage, which has been trying to reach him for some time during the 14-month long investigation.

Fred Barbash, the editor of Morning Mix, is a former National Editor and London