

Sect leaders abusing their access to the press

There is an implicit journalistic canon that "the other side" must always be given an opportunity to respond to an attack. So the press has bent over backward to let leaders of the Church of Scientology rebut allegations of reprehensible practices by their organization.

It seems the sect leaders have devised a strategy to take an unfair advantage of this access to the media.

They are traveling about America holding press conferences and making startling accusations, with little or no documentation to support them.

At a Clearwater news conference about a week ago, International President Heber C. Jentsch related a conspiracy story that sounded like the plot for a "Terry and the Pirates" comic strip.

That tale centered on long-time Scientology opponent Michael Flynn. The sect accused the Boston lawyer of plotting to cash a forged \$2.5-million check on L. Ron Hubbard's bank account.

Hubbard is the former science fiction author who concocted Scientology and parlayed it into a worldwide money-making machine.

Wednesday, Jentsch held another press conference to tell about an even more phantasmagorical conspiracy. This time, the Scientologists

purported to alert the Clearwater public to a plot by some unnamed corporation to depress downtown property values then buy up the area.

Jentsch contended the corporation has been campaigning to discredit Scientology because it wants the sect's Clearwater holdings.

He gave no names, produced no evidence. Yet he made front-page news.

On the face of it, his charges seem absurd.

In the United States, Canada and Britain, recent court cases have resulted in the worst kind of publicity for the Scientologists. Surely, Jentsch isn't asking us to believe the evidence in those cases was fabricated by a corporation interested in buying Clearwater real estate?

Furthermore, there is no indication that any individual or corporation (except the Church of Scientology) is eagerly buying up downtown properties. Time and again, downtown buildings languish for months after being put up for sale.

Jentsch said he "may" announce the company's identity within the next three weeks. If he does not back up his charges with names and evidence within that time, his credibility will be gravely damaged.

And the media would be justified in ignoring future Scientology "press conferences."