

OPINION

Judging Lawyers

It's a sunny day in Seattle when two lawyers can bring a class action suit on their own behalf—and then see it rejected on First Amendment grounds. That's what happened last week in the Emerald City, when Federal District Judge Robert S. Lasnik ruled that there was no basis for cracking down on a lawyer-rating Web site merely because some of its ratees didn't like how they were portrayed.

The site, called Avvo, does for lawyers what any number of magazines and Web sites have been doing for other professions for years. Magazines regularly publish stories that rank an area's doctors and dentists. There are rating sites and blogs for the "best" hairstylists, manicurists, restaurants and movie theaters. Almost any consumer product or service these days is sorted and ranked.

Professional ego aside, it's hard to see why lawyers or judges should be any different. At a time when the judicial system is under increasing scrutiny, the courtroom performances and verdicts of its practitioners would seem a reasonable object of public interest. For those shopping for legal counsel, an online rating service might at least provide some measure of transparency in an otherwise opaque profession.

Noting his own billing as a top-flight judge by another Web site called Lawdragon, Judge Lasnik recalled in his opinion the old admonition that "that and five cents will get you a ride on the ferry." One of the lawyers who brought the case claimed his shoddy rankings were inaccurate thanks to his previous recognition as a "Super Lawyer" by "Washington Law and Politics." We'll let our readers decide if being called a "super lawyer" is a compliment.