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WEB-ONLY

Suit against lawyer ratings site dismissed

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A federal judge has dismissed a class action complaint against Avvo Inc., a Web site launched this year that rates lawyers.

Two Seattle lawyers, John Henry Browne and Alan J. Wenokur, had filed the complaint on June 14, about a week after Avvo launched its site, www.avvo.com. They alleged that the site violated Washington's consumer protection law. Avvo filed a motion to dismiss on First Amendment grounds, among other arguments.

On Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Robert S. Lasnik called the site's information subjective enough that a consumer wouldn't mistake the ratings as facts. *Browne v. Avvo*, No. 2:07-cv-00920 (W.D. Wash.) Of the plaintiffs, he added: "To the extent that their lawsuit has focused a spotlight on how ludicrous the rating of attorneys (and judges) has become, more power to them. To the extent that they seek to prevent the dissemination of opinions regarding attorneys and judges, however, the First Amendment precludes their cause of action." On its site, Avvo publishes disciplinary actions, client ratings and lawyer endorsements. Geared toward consumers of legal services, Avvo also provides its own rating, based on state courts, bar associations and lawyer Web sites, of attorneys licensed to practice in Arizona, California, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington.

"This is a huge win for our First Amendment rights to express our opinions as Americans," said Bruce E.H. Johnson, a partner in the Seattle office of Davis Wright Tremaine, who represented Avvo, in a press released issue by Avvo.

Steve Berman, managing partner of Hagens Berman Sobol Shapiro in Seattle, who represents Browne and Wenokur, did not return a call for comment.