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6 UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
WESTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON
7 AT SEATTLE

8 JOHN HENRY BROWNE, *et al.*,
9 Plaintiffs,
10 v.
11 AVVO, INC., *et al.*,
12 Defendants.
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Case No. C07-0920RSL
ORDER GRANTING DEFENDANTS'
MOTION TO DISMISS

14 This matter comes before the Court on “Defendants’ Motion to Dismiss Class
15 Action Complaint Under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(c).” Dkt. # 6. Plaintiffs John Henry Browne and
16 Alan J. Wenokur claim that defendants’ website, on which information about attorneys and a
17 comparative rating system appears, violates the Washington Consumer Protection Act. Plaintiffs
18 seek injunctive relief against defendants: plaintiff Browne also has an individual claim seeking
19 an award of monetary damages. Defendants argue that the complaint should be dismissed
20 because: (1) the allegations of the complaint are not pled with the required specificity;
21 (2) defendants’ rating system and the republication of public records are protected by the First
22 Amendment and cannot be the basis of a state law claim; (3) plaintiffs’ Consumer Protection Act
23 claim fails as a matter of law; and (4) the Communications Decency Act bars liability for posting
24 third-party content.

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1 Where, as here, a motion under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(c) is used to raise the defense of
2 failure to state a claim, the Court's review is the same as it would have been had the motion
3 been filed under Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6). McGlinchy v. Shell Chem. Co., 845 F.2d 802, 810
4 (9th Cir. 1988). Although the Court's review is generally limited to the contents of the
5 complaint (Campanelli v. Bockrath, 100 F.3d 1476, 1479 (9th Cir. 1996)), Ninth Circuit
6 authority allows the Court to consider documents referenced extensively in the complaint,
7 documents that form the basis of plaintiffs' claim, and matters of judicial notice when
8 determining whether the allegations of the complaint state a claim upon which relief can be
9 granted (United States v. Ritchie, 342 F.3d 903, 908-09 (9th Cir. 2003)). The archived screen
10 shots of pages from Avvo's mid-June 2007 website and the Washington State Bar Association
11 records submitted by the parties appear to fall within one or more of these categories. For
12 purposes of this motion, therefore, the allegations of the complaint and the documents submitted
13 will be accepted as true and construed in the light most favorable to plaintiffs. LSO, Ltd. v.
14 Stroh, 205 F.3d 1146, 1150 n.2 (9th Cir. 2000).

15 **A. PLEADING STANDARD**

16 Defendants argue that the complaint in this matter fails to satisfy the heightened
17 pleading standards set forth in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, __ U.S. __, 127 S. Ct. 1955
18 (May 21, 2007), and Flowers v. Carville, 310 F.3d 1118, 1130 (9th Cir. 2002). Motion at 6-7.
19 Because defendants have made no attempt to identify any particular deficiency in plaintiffs'
20 allegations, the Court need not divine the Supreme Court's intent in Twombly or determine
21 whether a special pleading standard applies to a Consumer Protection Act claim based on
22 protected speech. The complaint identifies the statements alleged to be unlawful, how and when
23 they were made, and the type of damage caused. The factual allegations adequately state the
24 grounds upon which plaintiffs' claim rests and provide enough information for the Court to
25 determine whether those claims are legally sufficient. Absent some assistance from defendants
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1 in identifying a claim that is based on nothing more than “labels and conclusions” or “a
2 formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of action” (Twombly, 127 S. Ct. at 1964-65), the
3 Court finds that plaintiffs’ complaint satisfies the various pleading standards that may apply
4 under Twombly and/or Flowers.

5 **B. FIRST AMENDMENT**

6 Plaintiffs’ primary challenge is to the accuracy and validity of the numerical rating
7 system used by Avvo to compare attorneys. Defendants assert that the opinions expressed
8 through the rating system, (*i.e.*, that attorney X is a 3.5 and/or that an attorney with a higher
9 rating is better able to handle a particular case than an attorney with a lower rating), are
10 absolutely protected by the First Amendment and cannot serve as the basis for liability under
11 state law. The Court agrees. The key issue is whether the challenged statement could
12 “reasonably have been interpreted as stating actual facts” about plaintiff. Hustler Magazine, Inc.
13 v. Falwell, 485 U.S. 46, 50 (1988). In making this determination, the Court is to consider the
14 work as a whole, including the context in which the statements were made. Using the standards
15 set forth in Milkovich v. Lorain Journal Co., 497 U.S. 1 (1990), the Ninth Circuit has developed
16 a three-part test for determining whether a reasonable factfinder could conclude that the
17 offending statement implies an assertion of objective fact: “(1) whether the general tenor of the
18 entire work negates the impression that the defendant was asserting an objective fact, (2)
19 whether the defendant used figurative or hyperbolic language that negates that impression, and
20 (3) whether the statement in question is susceptible of being proved true or false.” Partington v.
21 Bugliosi, 56 F.3d 1147, 1153 (9th Cir. 1995) (citing Unelko Corp. v. Rooney, 912 F.2d 1049,
22 1053 (9th Cir. 1990)).

23 Avvo’s website contains numerous reminders that the Avvo rating system is
24 subjective. The ratings are described as an “assessment” or “judgment,” two words that imply
25 some sort of evaluative process. The underlying data is weighted based on Avvo’s subjective
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1 opinions regarding the relative importance of various attributes, such as experience, disciplinary
2 proceedings, client evaluations, and self-promotion. How an attribute is scored and how it is
3 weighed in comparison with other attributes is not disclosed, but a reasonable person would
4 understand that two people looking at the same underlying data could come up with vastly
5 different ratings depending on their subjective views of what is relevant and what is important.
6 A potential client would expect that a system designed to rate the professional abilities of
7 attorneys would incorporate the expertise and reflect the subjective opinions of the reviewer:
8 the website even says as much. Neither the nature of the information provided nor the language
9 used on the website would lead a reasonable person to believe that the ratings are a statement of
10 actual fact.

11 This conclusion is bolstered by the fact that the Avvo rating system is an
12 abstraction. A certain level of experience, for example, is assigned a value which is then
13 crunched with the values assigned to the attorney's disciplinary history, references, awards, *etc.*
14 The product of this calculation is a number between one and ten, which consumers are invited to
15 use to compare attorneys in the same field. No reasonable consumer would believe that Avvo is
16 asserting that plaintiff Browne is a "5.5." The rating is figurative: it represents in an abstracted
17 form some panoply of attributes and the values Avvo has assigned them. A user of the Avvo site
18 would understand that "5.5" is not a statement of fact. To the extent the numbers are tied to
19 fuzzy descriptive phrases like "superb," "good," and "strong caution," a reasonable reader would
20 understand that these phrases and their application to a particular attorney are subjective and, as
21 discussed below, not sufficiently factual to be proved or disproved.

22 The last part of the Partington test is "whether the statement in question is
23 susceptible of being proved true or false." Plaintiffs challenge the accuracy of the ratings in the
24 abstract (plaintiff Browne maintains that he is not a 5.5 or otherwise "average") as well as the
25 implied comparison between attorneys (plaintiffs assert that Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader
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1 Ginsburg should not have a lower rating than Avvo’s Chief Executive Officer). Defendants’
2 decision to assign plaintiff Browne a rating of 5.5 is debatable: one could argue, for example,
3 that Browne’s thirty-five years of experience raise him above the “average.” Nevertheless,
4 defendants’ rating is not only defensible, it is virtually impossible to prove wrong. Defendants
5 fairly describe the nature of the information on which Avvo’s ratings are based and make it clear
6 that (a) there may be other relevant data that the rating does not consider and (b) the conversion
7 of the available information into a number involves judgment, interpretation, and assessment. It
8 is apparently defendants’ view that a relatively recent admonition by the state disciplinary
9 authority weighs heavily against Browne’s experience and a generic attorney endorsement. One
10 may disagree with defendants’ evaluation of the underlying objective facts, but the rating itself
11 cannot be proved true or false.¹ The comparison of two ratings may provide additional fodder
12 for the debate, but even surprising results like the fact that a Supreme Court Justice had a lower
13 rating than defendant Britton do not prove that the ratings are true or false. Consumers and the
14 attorneys profiled have access to the underlying information and, while they may disagree with a
15 particular rating and/or the implied comparisons drawn therefrom, “[t]here is no objective
16 standard by which one can measure an advocate’s abilities with any certitude or determine
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19 ¹ Ratings and reviews are, by their very nature, subjective and debatable. See Aviation Charter,
20 Inc. v. Aviation Research Group/US, 416 F.3d 864, 870 (8th Cir. 2005) (noting that although
21 defendant’s critique of plaintiff “relies in part on objectively verifiable data, the interpretation of those
22 data was ultimately a subjective assessment, not an objectively verifiable fact”). Comparisons and
23 comparative ratings are often based as much on the biases of the reviewer as on the merits of the
24 reviewed: they should, therefore, be relied upon with caution. For example, in 2006, a new magazine
25 called Lawdragon purported to identify the 500 leading judges in the United States. The undersigned
26 was chosen to be one of the privileged 500 and was described as follows: “Seattle’s judicial star cites
Bob Dylan in opinions while providing contraceptives and protecting orca whales.” The Leading Judges
in America, Lawdragon, Winter 2006, at 72. What can one say about such nonsense? As my parents
would tell me when I informed them of some of my amazing achievements as a child in Staten Island,
NY, “that and five cents will get you a ride on the ferry.”

1 conclusively the truth or falsity of [Avvo’s] statements” Partington, 56 F.3d at 1158.²

2 Rather than seeing the Avvo ratings for what they are – “that and \$1.50 will get
3 you a ride on Seattle’s new South Lake Union Streetcar” – plaintiffs Browne and Wenokur want
4 to make a federal case out of the number assigned to them because (a) it could harm their
5 reputation, (b) it could cost them customers/fees, or (c) it could mislead the lawyer-hiring public
6 into retaining poor lawyers or bypassing better lawyers. To the extent that their lawsuit has
7 focused a spotlight on how ludicrous the rating of attorneys (and judges) has become, more
8 power to them. To the extent that they seek to prevent the dissemination of opinions regarding
9 attorneys and judges, however, the First Amendment precludes their cause of action. In
10 apparent recognition of the fact that Avvo’s rating system is protected speech under the First
11 Amendment, plaintiffs’ responsive memorandum highlights three other practices which are said
12 to violate the Washington Consumer Protection Act. Plaintiffs challenge the truthfulness of
13 defendants’ assertion that the rating system is unbiased, the accuracy of some of the data
14 included in the attorney profiles,³ and defendants’ overall business model because it forces
15 attorneys to provide biographical information in order to avoid a poor rating. The merits of

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17 ² Ironically, plaintiff Browne relies on his designation as a “Super Lawyer” by Washington Law
18 & Politics magazine as evidence that he could not possibly deserve an “average” rating from Avvo. Why
19 one should assume that the attorney rating system developed by Washington Law & Politics is any better
20 than that used by Avvo is not specified, and the Court is not inclined to make such an assumption. In
21 2004, the undersigned imposed sanctions of almost \$40,000 against another supposedly “Super Lawyer”
22 for engaging in unreasonable and vexatious litigation tactics. In its opinion affirming the decision, the
23 Ninth Circuit said, “[t]he record supports the district court’s finding that [this Super Lawyer] knowingly
24 pursued frivolous claims and engaged in obfuscatory litigation tactics.” Athearn v. Alaska Airlines, Inc.,
25 No. 03-35140, 2004 WL 2726045, at *2 (Dec. 1, 2004). Notwithstanding the fact that impartial
26 decision-makers had recently found her conduct sanctionable, this counsel was re-elected a “Super
27 Lawyer” in 2005 for the third year in a row.

28 ³ Defendants’ argument regarding its right to republish information obtained from state bar
29 associations misses the mark. Plaintiffs are not challenging defendants’ right to reprint public records or
30 the disclosure of any particular disciplinary action. Rather, plaintiffs argue that some of the information
31 disclosed does not accurately reflect the underlying bar association records and is therefore inaccurate.

1 plaintiffs' Consumer Protection Act claim are discussed below.

2 **C. CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT**

3 The Washington Consumer Protection Act ("CPA") prohibits "[u]nfair methods of
4 competition and unfair or deceptive acts or practices in the conduct of any trade or commerce."
5 RCW 19.86.020. A private cause of action exists under the CPA if (1) the conduct is unfair or
6 deceptive, (2) occurs in trade or commerce, (3) affects the public interest, and (4) causes injury
7 (5) to plaintiff's business or property. Hangman Ridge Training Stables, Inc. v. Safeco Title Ins.
8 Co., 105 Wn.2d 778, 780 (1986). Defendants argue that plaintiffs are unable to satisfy the
9 second and fourth elements of their CPA claim.

10 "Trade" and "commerce" are defined as "the sale of assets or services, and any
11 commerce directly or indirectly affecting the people of the state of Washington." RCW
12 19.86.010(2). Avvo collects data from public sources, attorneys, and references, rates attorneys
13 (where appropriate), and provides both the underlying data and the ratings to consumers free of
14 charge. No assets or services are sold to people who visit the site in the hopes of finding a
15 lawyer and no charge is levied against attorneys or references who choose to provide
16 information. It is hard to imagine how an information clearinghouse and/or ratings service could
17 be considered "commerce," and plaintiffs have offered no theory on this point.

18 Instead, plaintiffs argue that Avvo's offer to sell advertising space to attorneys
19 transforms all of defendants' activities into trade or commerce. The advertising program is
20 separate and distinct from the attorney profiles that are the subject of plaintiffs' complaint.
21 Plaintiffs have not alleged any misstatements of fact or unfair methods of competition involving
22 the advertising program and cannot simply assume that since some of defendants' actions are
23 entrepreneurial, all of them are. In Fidelity Mortgage Corp. v. Seattle Times Co., 131 Wn. App.
24 462, 470 (2005), the court found that a newspaper's publication of mortgage rates from various
25 lenders was not, in the absence of payment from the lenders, trade or commerce. On the other
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1 hand, the same rate chart could be considered trade or commerce if the newspaper accepted an
2 advertising fee in exchange for including a lender in the chart. As plaintiffs' allege in their
3 complaint and acknowledge in their response, defendants do not accept payment for the
4 inclusion of an attorney on Avvo's website and neither attorneys nor consumers pay to access
5 the site. Avvo's publication of information and ratings based on available data is not "trade or
6 commerce" and cannot form the basis of a CPA claim.

7 In addition, most, if not all, of the damages asserted in this case are either too
8 remote to be recoverable or are not cognizable under the CPA. Private citizens can utilize the
9 CPA to protect the public interest if defendant, by unfair or deceptive acts or practices, has
10 induced plaintiff to act or refrain from acting. Fidelity Mortgage, 131 Wn. App. at 468-69
11 (citing Anhold v. Daniels, 94 Wn.2d 40, 46 (1980)). Except as noted below, Avvo did not
12 induce plaintiffs to act or refrain from acting. Plaintiff Browne's damage claim is based on his
13 assertion that third-party consumers of legal services were misled by the information and ratings
14 provided by Avvo. To the extent that some of these consumers may have refrained from hiring,
15 or may even have fired, plaintiff Browne based on his attorney profile, he seeks damages
16 associated with lost fees.

17 Despite the fact that a causal link can be alleged, a claim for damages will fail if
18 the damages are too remote from the asserted cause. Washington courts have adopted the Ninth
19 Circuit's test for remoteness:

20 (1) whether there are more direct victims of the alleged wrongful conduct who can
21 be counted on to vindicate the law as private attorneys general; (2) whether it will
22 be difficult to ascertain the amount of the plaintiff's damages attributable to
23 defendant's wrongful conduct; and (3) whether the courts will have to adopt
24 complicated rules apportioning damages to obviate the risk of multiple recoveries.

25 Fidelity Mortgage, 131 Wn. App. at 470-71 (quoting Ass'n of Wash. Pub. Hosp. Dists. v. Philip
26 Morris, Inc., 241 F.3d 696, 701 (9th Cir. 2001)). All three evaluative criteria suggest that the
damages claimed by plaintiff Browne are so remote that they were not proximately caused by

1 defendants' publication of the offending attorney profiles. Consumers who were misled by the
2 information and ratings provided by Avvo are the direct victims of the alleged wrongdoing. If,
3 for example, a consumer hired a disbarred (and unethical) attorney based on inaccurate
4 information generated by Avvo, the consumer would be in the best position to seek redress for
5 payments made to the attorney and/or any losses resulting from the attorney's inability to
6 provide legal services. Allowing attorneys who were not hired by consumers to seek damages
7 would add unnecessary complexities to the claim. Identifying consumers who went elsewhere,
8 determining what, if any, role Avvo's website played in their decision to hire another attorney,
9 and establishing that the consumer was in fact injured would be incredibly difficult. Even if one
10 were able to identify such a consumer, calculating plaintiffs' expected revenues from the "lost"
11 client would be speculative at best. Finally, apportioning damages between Avvo and the
12 providers of incorrect data and/or competing attorneys who "game" the system would be very
13 complex. The damages alleged by plaintiff Browne are simply too remote to be proximately
14 caused by defendants' conduct.⁴

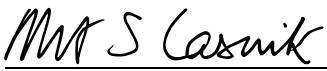
15 **C. COMMUNICATIONS DECENCY ACT**

16 Defendant argues that Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act bars
17 liability for posting third-party content. Plaintiffs have disavowed any claim based on content
18 that Avvo obtained from a third-party (Response at 23) and the Court need not consider this
19 defense further.
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23 ⁴ To the extent plaintiffs' complaint challenges defendants' overall business model, it could be
24 argued that defendants induced plaintiffs to act (*i.e.*, to provide biographical information) in order to
25 avoid a poor rating. Plaintiffs have not, however, alleged that inputting data on Avvo's website has in
26 any way injured them or caused damage cognizable under the CPA: plaintiffs' claims regarding
defendants' business model must, therefore, fail.

1 For all of the foregoing reasons, defendants' motion to dismiss is GRANTED.
2 Plaintiffs' claim that the Avvo rating system is inaccurate and misleading is barred by the First
3 Amendment. The various challenges highlighted in plaintiffs' responsive memorandum
4 (namely, that defendants mischaracterized the rating system, that some of the data included in
5 the attorney profiles is inaccurate, and that defendants' overall business model is coercive) do
6 not state a cause of action under the Consumer Protection Act. Because no amendment of the
7 complaint could cure the deficiencies identified above, plaintiffs' request for leave to amend is
8 DENIED.

9 Dated this 18th day of December, 2007.

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12 Robert S. Lasnik
13 United States District Judge
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