1	BILL LOCKYER		
2	Attorney General HERSCHEL T. ELKINS		
3	Senior Assistant Attorney General ALBERT NORMAN SHELDEN Supervising Deputy Attorney General M. HOWARD WAYNE, State Bar No. 54773 JUDITH A. FIORENTINI, State Bar No. 201747 Deputy Attorneys General 110 West A Street, Suite 1100 San Diego, California 92101		
4			
5			
6			
7	Telephone: (619) 645-2207 Facsimile: (619) 645-2062		
8	Attorneys for Plaintiff, People of the State of California		
9	reopie of the State of Camornia		
10	IN THE SUPERIOR COURT OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA		
11	FOR THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO		
12			
13	THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF	Case No.:	
14	CALIFORNIA,	COMPLAINT FOR INJUNCTION,	
15	Plaintiff,	CIVIL PENALTIES AND OTHER EQUITABLE RELIEF	
16	V.		
17	ALYON TECHNOLOGIES, INC.,		
18	a foreign corporation, STEPHANE TOUBOUL and		
19	DOES 1 through 100, inclusive,		
20	Defendants.		
21			
22	Plaintiff, People of the State of California ("Plaintiff" or "People), by and through Bill Lockyer,		
23	Attorney General of the State of California, alleges the following on information and belief:		
24	<u>DEFENDANTS</u>		
25	1. Defendants at all relevant times have transacted business in the City and County		
26	of San Diego and elsewhere in the State of California. The violations of law alleged herein have		
27	been and are being carried out within the City and County of San Diego and elsewhere in		
28	California.		
		1	
		1	

- 2. Defendant ALYON TECHNOLOGIES, INC. ("ALYON"), is a Delaware corporation with its office and principal place of business at One Harmon Plaza, Second Floor, Secausus, New Jersey 07094.
- 3. Defendant STEPHANE TOUBOUL ("TOUBOUL"), is the chief executive officer of ALYON and is sued both in his individual capacity and in his capacity as chief executive officer and an owner of ALYON. At all times material to this complaint, acting alone or in concert with others, he has formulated, directed, controlled, or participated in the acts and practices of Defendant ALYON.
- 4. Whenever reference is made in this complaint to any act or transaction of a Defendant such allegation shall be deemed to mean that said Defendant and its owners, officers, directors, agents, employees, or representatives did or authorized such acts while engaged in the management, direction, or control of the affairs of the Defendant and while acting within the scope and course of their duties.
- 5. Whenever in this complaint reference is made to any act of any Defendant, such allegation shall be deemed to mean that said Defendant was acting (a) as a principal, (b) under express or implied agency, and/or (c) with actual or ostensible authority to perform the acts so alleged.
- 6. Whenever in this complaint reference is made to any act of Defendants, such allegation shall be deemed to mean the act of each Defendant acting individually and jointly with the other Defendants named in that cause of action.
- 7. At all times mentioned herein, each Defendant knew or realized that the other Defendants were engaging in or planned to engage in the violations of law alleged in this Complaint. Knowing or realizing that other Defendants were engaging in such unlawful conduct, each Defendant nevertheless facilitated the commission of those unlawful acts. Each Defendant intended to and did encourage, facilitate, or assist in the commission of the unlawful acts, and thereby aided and abetted the other Defendants in the unlawful conduct.
- 8. The true names and capacities, whether individual, corporate, or otherwise, of Defendants sued herein under the fictitious names of DOES 1 through 100, inclusive, are

unknown to plaintiff who therefore sues said Defendants by such fictitious names. Plaintiff will amend this complaint to show the true names of each when the same has been ascertained.

DEFINITIONS

- 9. For the purposes of this Complaint, the following definitions shall apply:
- A. "Line subscriber" means an individual or entity who has arranged to obtain local telephone service provided through an assigned telephone number, and to be billed for such service on a monthly (or other periodic) basis.
- B. "Videotext services" means visual (and in some instances audio) information and entertainment services offered over the Internet through individual World Wide Web sites ("websites").
- C. "Service vendor" or "vendor" means an entity that offers videotext or other services that are billed to line subscribers either on the telephone bills received by line subscribers or on other bills sent directly to the line subscribers.
- D. "ALYON Defendants" means Defendant ALYON and Defendant TOUBOUL.

DEFENDANTS' BUSINESS PRACTICES

- 10. ALYON, and TOUBOUL alone or in concert with some of the Defendants herein sued as DOES 1-100, provide or have provided a billing system to service vendors (hereinafter referred to as "the ALYON billing system") that permits the vendors to charge consumers whose telephone lines were allegedly used to access the vendors' videotext services on a per-minute basis. The ALYON billing system is touted as an alternative method of payment for consumers who do not wish to place such charges on their credit cards.
- 11. To use the ALYON billing system, consumers must download on their computer a modem-dialing software program ("dialing program") offered through the service vendors' websites. First, consumers allegedly select the option to access vendor's videotext services without a credit card. Then, consumers allegedly select "modem/ISDN" as the type of Internet connection method used by their computer. After selecting this connection method, a new web page loads, allegedly containing a "disclosure statement" of the "terms of services" that requires

consumers to click "I accept" before they are able to access vendors' videotext services by clicking "I Accept." Some consumers first get to ALYON's network by responding to pop-up boxes which appear on their computer screen when they or their children are on other web cites on the Internet. Once there, they are prompted to download certain dialer programs onto the computer they are using. Other consumers report that when they open unsolicited electronic mail messages, they receive prompts to download certain dialer programs onto the computer they are using.

- 12. The material terms of service, including the cost and the method by which consumers will be billed, are often not clearly and conspicuously disclosed. In numerous instances, the disclosure statement is presented in the form of a text box that contains only a few lines of text at any one time; sometimes the scroll down function of the box is disabled so that even consumers who want to cannot read the purported disclosure. To print out the full text of the disclosure statement requires up to four or more pages. Consumers can become part of Defendants' billing system without actually reading or scrolling through the text, because Defendants' system can be entered merely by clicking the "I Accept" button.
- 13. Defendants claim that after consumers click "I Accept," they must click "Connect." If the person using the computer does this, the dialing program disconnects the consumer's modem from the consumer's normal Internet Service Provider ("ISP") and reconnects the consumer's modem to the Internet through a telephone connection to ALYON's network via a telephone connection to a "201" area code telephone number which is in New Jersey. The consumer may then access the service vendor's videotext services. The consumer is charged \$4.99 for each minute he or she is connected to the Internet via ALYON's network.
- 14. The ALYON Internet reconnect dialing program disconnects the consumer line subscriber's modem from the line subscriber's normal ISP when the consumer tries to connect to the Internet and reconnects to the Internet through ALYON's network via a telephone connection to a "201" area code telephone number which is in New Jersey. In numerous instances, the ALYON Internet reconnect dialing program is downloaded to a consumer's computer without the knowledge or consent of the consumer line subscriber whose telephone

line is connected to the computer. Some consumers who claim that they did not click "I accept" still report having the ALYON Internet reconnect program downloaded onto their computers. Some of these programs and/or files appear to be self-executing, meaning that the program can cause a computer to reconnect to the 201 area code telephone number without the consumer using the computer taking any affirmative steps. The Defendants charge the consumer line subscriber, or the person the Defendants believe is the line subscriber, \$4.99 for each minute the line subscriber's computer is connected to the Internet via ALYON's network.

- 15. The programs and/or files which the Defendants place or cause to be placed on consumers' computers do not work as the Defendants claim. Instead, consumers report that these programs and/or files function or have in some instances functioned in the following ways:
 - A. Upon visiting a website for which the Defendants provide their billing services, consumers' computers are bombarded with numerous pop-up boxes, and while the consumers were trying unsuccessfully to close all of the pop-up boxes, the dialer program was downloaded onto their computers without their authorization;
 - B. Consumers' computers have been connected to the 201 area code telephone numbers, even if consumers have not first clicked on both "I Agree" and "Connect."
- 16. When a consumer uses the dialing program to access a vendor's videotext services, a system known as Automatic Number Identification ("ANI") is used to capture the telephone number from which the call is being placed. Using ANI information, Defendants identify the consumer who they believe is the line subscriber responsible for the captured telephone number, and send that consumer a bill. Defendants make no attempt to determine whether the person they are billing downloaded the dialing program, or viewed the vendor's videotext services, or authorized anyone else to do so from the consumer's computer.
- 17. Since a date unknown to plaintiff but at least since June 2002, the ALYON Defendants, themselves or using the services of some of the Doe Defendants or other agents, have mailed bills directly to the consumer line subscribers whose telephone lines purportedly were used to access vendors' videotext services through the ALYON billing system. The

Defendants initially send bills that list ALYON's name at the top to consumers, and include a Post Office Box number to which consumers are instructed to return their payments. These bills also list a toll-free number for consumers to call if they have any questions about the bill, and direct consumers to access ALYON's website at www.Alyon.net for customer service.

- 18. The bills include a statement that charges are for "Pay Per Use Internet Access to Proprietary Content as an Entertainment Fee." The second page of each bill lists any calls purportedly made using the ALYON Internet reconnect dialing program. Each call is billed at a rate of \$4.99 per minute with an offsetting credit of \$0.10 per minute for "LD charges." The bills are sent to consumers with a "due date" less than two weeks from the date of the invoice. In numerous instances, consumers receive their first bill three or four days before payment is due.
- 19. The bills also provide a notice of customers' billing rights, which states that the "rights and obligations of the customer and the billing entity are provided under the Telephone Disclosure and Dispute Resolution Act." This notice also states that consumers must provide notification of any billing error in writing to ALYON's P.O. Box in Georgia within 30 days after the mailing date of the first bill. In numerous instances, after receiving written notices of billing errors from consumers, Defendants do not forgive the charges, nor do they conduct a reasonable investigation into the validity of the charges and notify the customers of why they are sustaining the charges. Instead, Defendants simply subject complainants to additional billing and collection efforts, and in some instances directly or indirectly threaten to adversely affect a complainant's credit history.
- 20. In the vast majority of instances, consumers who do not pay after receiving their first bill receive a second bill. Defendants mail the second bill less than thirty days from the invoice date of the first bill. The second bill states that payment is necessary to prevent collection activity.
- 21. Many consumers who have received the Defendants' bills do not know what they are being billed for. In many instances, neither the consumer nor anyone in the consumer's household has ever accessed ALYON's vendors' videotext services on the Internet, used their

///

///

computer modem to make such a call, or has ever authorized any person to do so. In other instances, a line subscriber has discovered that a minor in the line subscriber's household, or another who does not have the line subscriber's authorization, has accessed videotext services using the ALYON billing system.

- 22. In numerous instances, consumers who have called ALYON's toll-free number to inquire about the charges that appear on the bills find it virtually impossible to reach an ALYON representative. Consumers report calling numerous times throughout a number of days, without ever receiving an answer. In numerous instances, consumers who have e-mailed Defendant ALYON via its website have received only a form response which indicates that the consumer must pay the bill. In the vast majority of instances, ALYON representatives represent that consumers, as line subscribers, are responsible for the charges made over their telephone lines, regardless of the explanation.
- 23. In some instances, ALYON representatives offer to reduce the amount owed when a minor has accessed a vendor's website without the line subscriber's permission, but only if a line subscriber provides an affidavit and copy of the minor's birth certificate. In some other instances, ALYON, through its representatives and its website, represents to line subscribers that they must provide an affidavit and proof from their telephone exchange carrier that no call was made to ALYON's servers before ALYON will remove the charges.
- 24. Consumers have indicated they have had difficulty removing Defendant ALYON's dialer program from their computers once it has been downloaded. In numerous instances, consumers who have followed Defendant ALYON's dialer program removal instructions on its website, complain that the dialer program comes back even when they follow the instructions. Since the program is downloaded into the computer's registry, it often becomes part of the computer's booting process and thus can come back when the computer is rebooted even if consumers delete the shortcut icon from the desktop.

FIRST CAUSE OF ACTION AGAINST ALL DEFENDANTS FOR UNTRUE OR MISLEADING STATEMENTS

(Violations of Business and Professions Code section 17500)

- 25. Paragraphs 1 through 24 of this complaint are incorporated herein as though set forth in full.
- 26. Beginning at a date unknown to plaintiff and continuing to the present, ALYON, TOUBOUL and DOES 1-100, with the intent to induce California consumers to use the ALYON billing system that ALYON provides or has provided, have made or caused to be made, and continue to make, in violation of Business and Professions Code section 17500, numerous untrue or misleading statements before the public in the City and County of San Diego and elsewhere in the State of California. Such statements include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - A. Defendants bill consumers for videotext services that they represent were provided at the consumers request through the consumers' telephone lines using Defendants' dialing program. Such representations are untrue or misleading in that in numerous instances, the videotext services were not provided at the consumers request to the consumer being billed through the consumers' telephone lines.
 - B. Defendants represent that because a line subscriber's telephone was used to access videotext services through Defendants' dialing program, the line subscriber is legally obligated to pay Defendants for those videotext services. Such representations are untrue or misleading in that they do not adequately disclose, if they disclose at all, that there are numerous instances in which line subscribers are not legally obligated to pay Defendants for videotext services accessed via Defendants' dialing program using the line subscribers' telephone lines.
 - C. Defendants represent to consumers that they owe money to the Defendants when, in fact, such representations are untrue or misleading in that in numerous instances:
 - i. the telephone number from which the connection to videotext services was made was not assigned to the billed consumers at the time the call

Defendants directly or through one or more of the DOE Defendants, bill, attempt to collect, and collect charges from consumers:

- i. who do not own a computer;
- ii. who were not assigned the billed telephone number at the time the Defendants claim the connection to the videotext services were made;
- iii. who were not at home or who were not using their computers at time the Defendants claim the connection to the videotext services were made; and
 - iv. whose minor children accessed the videotext services.
- C. A line subscriber cannot reasonably avoid Defendants' billing and collection efforts for videotext services accessed through the line subscriber's telephone line because a line subscriber cannot reasonably anticipate or prevent charges incurred through use of his or her telephone line to domestic telephone numbers (such as a "201" area code telephone number) using Defendants' dialing program.
- D. Defendants' engage in the practice of billing, attempting to collect, and collecting charges from line subscribers who neither themselves access videotext services provided over domestic telephone lines using the Defendants' dialing program, nor who authorize anyone else to do so. In numerous instances, the ALYON Defendants' dialing programs are downloaded onto line subscribers' computers without their authorization. The dialing programs then cause the line subscribers' telephone lines to dial a 201 area code telephone number in New Jersey to access videotext services for which Defendants cause consumers to be billed to and for which Defendants collect, attempt to collect or arrange for the collection of payment from the line subscriber. Because line subscribers can neither reasonably block Defendants' dialing programs from their computers nor block the use of their telephone lines to make long distance calls to telephone numbers which are not traditional pay-per-call prefixed numbers (i.e., 900, 976, etc.), consumers cannot reasonably avoid the use of their telephone line to sign onto Defendants' dialing programs to access videotext services. Therefore, line subscribers cannot reasonably

avoid the billing and collection efforts for supposed videotext services accessed through Defendants' dialing programs and the line subscribers' telephone lines.

- E. Defendants' commit the practice of downloading dialing programs to line subscribers' computers that access videotext services through long distance telephone calls without the line subscribers' authorization.
- F. Defendants have violated the federal "Pay-Per-Call" Rule,16 C.F.R. Section 308.7, which regulates billing and collection practices for pay-per-call services including telephone-billed purchases, by failing to comply with the procedures required therein, as follows:
 - i. Section 308.7(a)(6) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule defines a telephone billed purchase as "any purchase that is completed solely as a consequence of the completion of the call or a subsequent dialing, touch tone entry, or comparable action of the caller." In numerous instances, Defendants bill line subscribers for videotext services purchased as the result of the completion of a call from the line subscriber's telephone lines. Therefore, Defendants' bills contain charges for telephone-billed purchases.

Under Section 308.7(a)(1) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule a "billing entity" is defined as "any person who transmits a billing statement to a customer for a telephone-billed purchase, or any person who assumes responsibility for receiving and responding to billing error complaints." As described above, ALYON, directly or through one or more of the DOE Defendants, transmits billing statements to customers for telephone-billed purchases and assumes responsibility for receiving and responding to billing error complaints, and therefore is a billing entity.

Section 308.7(d) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule provides that once a customer has submitted notice of billing error, the billing entity must, either forgive the charge or send a written acknowledgment to the customer including a statement that any disputed amount need not be paid pending investigation of the billing

error, no later than 40 days after receiving the notice; conduct a reasonable investigation; and, where a billing error has occurred, correct the customer's account for any disputed amount and any related charges, and notify the customer setting forth the reasons why it has determined that no billing error occurred. Defendants have violated Section 308.7(d) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule by engaging in the following acts or practices including, but not limited to:

- a. After receiving notices of billing errors from customers,
 Defendants have failed and continue to fail to either correct billing errors
 and credit the accounts or transmit explanations of why Defendants have
 determined, after conducting a reasonable investigation, that no billing
 errors have occurred;
- b. Defendants have attempted and continue to attempt to collect disputed amounts from customers after such customers have submitted notices of billing errors to Defendants but before the Defendants have complied with Section 308.7(d) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule;
- ii. Section 308.7(g) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule provides that once a customer has submitted notice of a billing error to a billing entity, the customer need not pay, and the billing entity may not try to collect, any portion of any required payment that the customer reasonably believes is related to the disputed amount until the billing entity receiving the notice has conducted a reasonable investigation and either corrected the charge or determined that the charge is not in error, or set forth the reasons why it has determined that no billing error occurred. Defendants have violated Section 308.7(g) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule in that even after consumers submit notice of a billing error to Defendants, they have tried to collect payments from the consumer that the consumer reasonably believes are related to the disputed amount, without first notifying the consumer that Defendants have conducted a reasonable investigation and either corrected

- iii. Section 308.7(i) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule provides that once a billing entity has received notice of a billing error, the billing entity may not threaten directly or indirectly to report adverse information to any person because of the customer's withholding payment of the disputed amount or related charges, until the billing entity has met the requirements of 308.7(d) and allowed the customer as many days thereafter to make payments as prescribed by 308.7(d)(3)(ii). Defendants have violated Section 308.7(i) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule in that Defendants have threatened and continue to threaten directly or indirectly to report adverse information because of customers' withholding of payment of disputed amounts, after such customers have submitted notices of billing errors to Defendants but before the Defendants have complied with Section 308.7(d) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule;
- iv. Section 308.7(n) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule requires billing entities to notify their customers of their dispute resolution rights. Defendants have violated Section 308.7(n) of the Pay-Per-Call Rule in that Defendants have failed and continue to fail to provide customers with accurate notices of their dispute resolution rights under the Pay-Per-Call Rule as required.
- G. Defendants provide an "information-access service" as defined by Business and Professions Code section 17539.5 subdivision (a)(6) in that they permit consumers to access a telephone number, for which the consumer is assessed, by virtue of placing or completing the call, a charge that is greater than, or in addition to, the charge for the transmission of the call. Defendants are an "information provider" as defined by Business and Professions Code section 17539.5 subdivision (a)(5) in that they advertise or sell an information-access service on whose behalf charges are billed. Business and Professions Code section 17539.5 subdivision (c) prohibits any person to solicit or sell an information access service unless the person clearly and conspicuously discloses in all

solicitations an accurate description of the information-access service; the name, address, and non-900 telephone number of the information provider; the cost of the call if the call is based on a usage sensitive basis, the cost per minute or other unit of time. Defendants have violated Business and Professions Code section 17539.5 subdivision (c) by placing or causing to be placed on California consumers' computers, the dialing program offered through the service vendors' websites through which the consumer will be billed by the ALYON billing system, without clearly and conspicuously disclosing the material terms of service, in that:

- i. The disclosure statement if presented at all, is presented, in the form of a text box that contains only a few lines of text at any one time. In some instances, the disclosure statement, including, but not limited to, the cost of the videotext services to which Defendants provide access and billing services, are not actually available to be viewed in its entirety, in that the scroll capability within the text box has been disabled;
 - ii. To print out the full text requires four or more pages;
- iii. To accept the terms of service, consumers need not scroll through the text, they only need to click "I Accept."
- iv. Defendants do not clearly and conspicuously provide an accurate description of how the ALYON Internet reconnect dialing program works.
- H. Defendants send bills to consumers without providing sufficient time for the consumers to pay the bill in that in numerous instances consumers receive their first bill three or four days before payment is due.
- I. Defendants do not provide adequate means for consumers to inquire about the charges that appear on the bills in that, in numerous instances:
 - i. consumers report being unable to reach a representative by calling
 ALYON's toll-free number;
 - ii. consumers who have e-mailed Defendant ALYON with inquiries receive only a form response; and

- iii. when consumers do reach an ALYON representative, the representative represents that consumers, as line subscribers, are responsible for the charges made over their telephone lines, regardless of the explanation.
- J. Defendants have violated Penal Code section 313.1, subdivision (a) in that they have, while failing to exercise reasonable care in ascertaining the true ages of minors, knowingly distributed, sent, or caused to be sent harmful matter, within the meaning of Penal Code section 313, subdivision (a), to said minors, and Defendants do not constitute a telephone corporation as defined by Public Utilities Code section 234.

PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, plaintiff prays for judgment as follows:

- 1. That pursuant to Business and Professions Code sections 17203 and 17535, Defendants, their successors, agents, representatives, employees, and all other persons who act under, by, through, or on behalf of any of them, or any of them, be permanently restrained and enjoined from doing any of the following acts:
 - A. Making or disseminating any of the untrue or misleading statements alleged in paragraphs 26 and 27 of this complaint or any other untrue or misleading statement in violation of Business and Professions Code sections 17500 et seq., relating to the ALYON billing system services.
 - B. Engaging in any of the acts of unfair competition set forth in paragraph 29 of this complaint or any other act of unfair competition in violation of Business and Professions Code sections 17200 et seq., relating to ALYON billing system services.
- 2. That pursuant to Business and Professions Code sections 17203 and 17535, Defendants be ordered to restore to California consumers any money which Defendants have acquired by means of their violations of section 17200 or 17500, respectively.
- 3. That pursuant to Business and Professions Code section 17206, each Defendant be assessed a civil penalty of \$2,500.00 for each violation of Business and Professions Code section 17200, as proven at trial, but in an amount of not less than \$1,000,000.00.
 - 4. That pursuant to Business and Professions Code section 17536, each Defendant

1	be assessed a civil penalty of \$2,500.00 for each violation of Business and Professions Code		
2	section 17500,	, as proven at trial, but in an amount of not less than \$1,000,000.00.	
3	5.	That plaintiff have such other and further relief as the nature of the case may	
4	require and as	the court deems appropriate and necessary.	
5	6.	That plaintiff recover its costs.	
6			
7	Dated:	May 15, 2003	
8		Respectfully submitted,	
9		BILL LOCKYER Attorney General of the State of California	
10		HERSCHEL T. ELKINS Senior Assistant Attorney General	
11		ALBERT NORMAN SHELDEN	
12		Supervising Deputy Attorney General M. HOWARD WAYNE	
13		JUDITH A. FIORENTINI Deputy Attorneys General	
14			
15 16		JUDITH A. FIORENTINI	
17		Deputy Attorney General Attorneys for Plaintiff, People of the State of	
18		California	
19			
20			
21			
22			
23			
24			
25			
26			
27			
28			
		16	