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WIND ON CAPITOL HILL

THE BRITNEY OPTION

by Adam Green

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In May, the Senate's eleventh-hour compromise on filibusters led to a lot of talk about a return to civility. The President's nomination, last week, of John G. Roberts to fill the upcoming vacancy on the Supreme Court may change that. Advocacy groups on both sides of the political fence are again cranking up their phone-bank operations and e-mail campaigns, as they get ready for a showdown. One organization, People for the American Way, is trying something new: an initiative to coordinate thousands of simultaneous calls to the Senate by alerting its members via cell-phone text messaging, a medium more generally associated with preteen flirting or casting votes for "American Idol" than with progressive activism. The group is calling the operation Mass Immediate Response, or mir, though at least one political observer has dubbed it the Britney Option.

mir is the creation of Jed Alpert, a wireless-entertainment entrepreneur, who originally developed the application, in 2001, for a cross-promotional marketing campaign by the electronics company Samsung and the pop star Britney Spears. At a cost of \$19.95 for three months, tens of thousands of the singer's fans (many of them, it turned out, men no longer in their teens) signed up to receive several text messages a week, supposedly from Britney. By selecting a link embedded in each message, subscribers would be led to a recorded message, either from Spears herself ("Hey, it's Britney Spears. Can I just tell you, I had a blast at your party—seriously, your friends are really cool. Next time I have a party, you're totally invited") or from one of the members of her entourage, among them her personal assistant, Alicia, and her bodyguard, Big Rob.

The novel aspect of the technology is its ability to deliver customized messages to registered cell-phone users, based on such criteria as the user's address, date of birth, and, in some cases, musical tastes. For participants in the Britney Spears promotion, this meant getting to hear Spears read their horoscopes every month. The horoscopes, Alpert explained the other day, were drawn up by "experienced, highly respected astrologers, based in Chicago—and half of that statement is true." They were also short and simple, and they often included an injunction to go for it.

Spears recorded only twelve different horoscopes, but, Alpert said, “a complex algorithm” allowed them to be circulated among the different signs of the zodiac for a year.

At the height of the filibuster debate last spring, Alpert was volunteering on the phone bank at People for the American Way. One night, after hours of leaving messages on answering machines, being asked to call back later, and getting trapped in long conversations with lonely radicals in the Midwest, he was struck by the inefficiency of person-to-person organizing over landlines. He realized that his wireless technology could be used to instantly mobilize thousands of activists, though they would have to be sorted by where they lived and who represented them in Washington, rather than by the alignment of the planets at the time of their birth. Alpert sold People for the American Way on the idea, and he is now shopping the technology around to other progressive organizations. (He recently changed its name from W.F.X., which stands for Wireless Fan Access, to Politext.)



"Do you have anything newer and more useless?"

Last week, on the morning after the Roberts nomination, People for the American Way was ready with its first mir campaign. Several thousand text messages went out to the cell phones of the group's participating members, urging them to call their senators (by clicking an embedded link) and tell them to “hold judgment until facts are in!”

It is unlikely that Spears will be involved in P.F.A.W.'s campaign in any capacity. “I'm not sure how closely Britney has been following this issue,” Alpert said. Some armchair strategists think that this could be a mistake. Astrological forecasts and breathy pep talks may not shed any light on the High Court nominee's judicial philosophy, but they could provide signposts for the months ahead.

For instance, Spears seems to predict that Roberts will move smoothly through the confirmation process. “That thing that has you so worried will work out, so don't worry too much,” she counsels the Judge—and everyone else born under the sign of Aquarius—in her W.F.X. horoscope for the

month of October, when the next Supreme Court session begins. And she offers Roberts a word of advice about the new job. “It looks like the flowers might be blooming for you, but the garden needs some T.L.C.,” she says. “Don't be afraid to get your hands dirty. That's what works.”

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