

Grabner, Dean “The Indian Occupation of Alcatraz Island and its 40-year Arc of Media Activism: 1969 and 2009”

This study uses comparative historical methods to examine the citizen-led radio activism that occurred during the American Indian occupation of Alcatraz in November 1969, and the digital media projects that centered around the 40th anniversary of the occupation in November 2009. On Nov. 20, 1969, some 89 American Indian college students seized Alcatraz Island in the name of “Indians of All Tribes” and held it for 19 months and nine days until June 11, 1971. Communication links to San Francisco Bay, Washington, D.C., and beyond were essential, and the occupiers worked with media on a number of levels, interacting frequently with mainstream news organizations and producing media of their own, such as “Radio Free Alcatraz” broadcast over Pacifica Radio, and the *Indians of All Tribes Newsletter*. These media, like those employed by other social movements of the time, presented unfiltered accounts of the Indians’ reasons for occupying “The Rock” and the objectives of the occupation.

Such accounts differed from mainstream media’s coverage, which often ridiculed and trivialized the Indians’ actions. When the occupation took place in 1969, it represented a bold act played out on a public stage on the centerpiece of San Francisco Bay. Forty years later, the participation of 3,500 people in a sunrise ceremony on Alcatraz Island suggests that the occupation remains highly relevant to contemporary movements that are seeking the same basic rights of citizenship as those that mobilized activists in 1969. Media activism, including the production of media texts, remains central to such movements. This paper examines both the 1969 radio broadcasts of Radio Free Alcatraz, and the 2008 podcast “Radio Free Alcatraz,” produced by media activists a generation later, as a case that illustrates broader patterns of cross-generational activism. It analyzes the convergences and divergences between the elder and younger generations, the fusion of old and new forms of collective action, and the mixture of pre- and post-digital media technologies.