Media power in digital Asia: Super apps and megacorps

Marc Steinberg
Concordia University, Canada

Rahul Mukherjee
University of Pennsylvania, USA

Aswin Punathambekar
University of Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract
Tracing global shifts in ownership and conglomeration in the media and technology sectors, this introduction analyzes the emergence of the ‘megacorp’ and ‘super app’ as distinct forms and sites of media power. With a focus on Asia, we argue that the pairing of megacorps and super apps is driving the emergence of powerful digital companies that shape social, cultural, and political dynamics worldwide. Through analyses of companies including Reliance, SoftBank, Tencent, Alibaba, and Transsion, this special issue calls for a renewed engagement with theories of monopoly capital via the megacorp, and accounts of consumer and citizen experiences of this monopoly via a quotidian touch point, the super app. In conversation with scholarship on conglomerates, monopolies, and platforms as key institutional forms of media power, we show that media power in this digital conjuncture operates as much through national and regional differences as through the imperative to achieve a global scale.

Keywords
Apps, Asia, media conglomeration, media industries, platform studies, political economy, super apps

Corresponding author:
Marc Steinberg, Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University, 1455 De Maisonneuve Blvd. W., FB 319, Montreal, QC H3G 1M8, Canada.
Email: Marc.Steinberg@concordia.ca
Introduction

The third season of the HBO series and family corporate drama *Succession* deals in part with the attempted acquisition, merger and, finally, reverse acquisition of legacy media conglomerate ‘Waystar Royco’ with the super app ‘GoJo’. The evocation of the super app here is of interest for several reasons. First, it signals the rise of the term itself and the widely felt sense that super apps are the future of media. Second, it raises questions around the corporate form of super apps as firms, while calling attention to the corporate-financial intrigues around super app ownership. Third it highlights the geographies of platforms in a multi-polar digital economy, with GoJo’s service being located outside the West. The *Succession* subplot demonstrates the arrival of super apps in popular media discourse and reflects recent attempts by companies like Facebook and Apple to emulate Tencent’s WeChat in the institution of all-purpose ‘super apps’ across which they can move (data) traffic (Heath, 2021). *Succession* also raises critical and timely questions about the role super apps are playing in shaping media conglomeration in a digital era. In the fictional narrative, the stock value of GoJo ultimately surpasses that of Waystar, thereby allowing the super app to acquire the legacy firm.

Signaling the financial weight of the super app business model and its impact on corporations, GoJo’s success points to an imagined shifting balance of power away from legacy media to digital media companies. Moreover, while GoJo is framed as a generic ‘global’ firm – run by a Swede and operating in Asia, a space simply outside the U.S. – the presentation of the super app as the future of media power connects the narrative to the techno-orientalism that suffuses conversations about China in the West (de Kloet et al., 2019: 2). In addition, the transformation of media technologies and markets can rarely be separated from innovations in corporate form that facilitates them. Management thinkers, ever in support of the newest trends, are now suggesting that digital platforms have rendered the traditional corporation irrelevant (Van Alstyne et al., 2016). In practice, the story is more complicated, with shifts in media forms – including the rise of super apps in Asia – being predicated on a variety of large-scale corporate actors with distinctive foundations and interests.

Building on app studies and platform studies’ attention to the transformation of cultural life and the media landscape (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) and media industry studies’ attention to local specificities (Herbert et al., 2020; Mohan and Punathambekar, 2019), this special issue interrogates the institutional conditions for the emergence of the super app, linking the super app to the massive megacorporation (or ‘megacorp’) behind it. Far from disappearing or being made redundant or disintermediated by platforms as some management writers predicted, the corporation has firmly reasserted its dominance in the era of Big Tech. Taken together, the articles in this special issue consider the corporate foundations of super apps and the logics and practices that serve to shore up new forms of digital media power. Building on economic theorist and historian Alfred S. Eichner’s term *megacorp*, our premise is that the emergence of super apps is predicated upon the ability of corporate giants to deploy their monopoly power in national and regional markets. Put simply, super apps, as an increasingly dominant media form in Asia, are inextricably bound up with the fortunes of megacorps building hegemonic positions in the digital economy. Mapping and analyzing this site of media power is critical for
understanding the unfolding impact of super apps in particular, and digital media technologies more generally.

Super apps are do-everything apps that bring together an expansive suite of services within a single interface. In some cases, this involves the incorporation of multiple functions within a single app. In other cases, the super app denotes the existence of an app family, each of which has its own functionalities under a single brand banner. Some instances of the super app rely upon a combination of functional integration and umbrella branding. Almost invariably, Asia’s super apps are large scale and dominant ventures that are highly dependent on massive, sprawling corporations whose heft allows them to build the crucial internal integration and external tie-ups that make their apps so super. Thus, WeChat in China is inseparable from Tencent, Jio in India is inseparable from Reliance, LINE in Japan is inseparable first from Naver and more recently from SoftBank. To properly account for the significance of these companies in the digital mediascape at the empirical level, we need to account for the ways that Asian tech giants are more than just media players. The ambitions and ideas of the digital megacorp are also bound up with the imaginary of Asia as both a site of futurity and a monolith, which points to another topic this special issue brings to the fore – the complex geopolitical dynamics underpinning digital media economies.

Drawing on media and communication scholarship on conglomerates, monopolies, and platforms, we argue that megacorps and super apps are a foundational pairing for platform economies in Asia. They are key sites where media power (along with financial, political-economic, and cultural hegemony) is being asserted, consolidated and contested much more widely. Focusing on Asia’s super apps and megacorps thus allows us to pose critical questions about the underlying logics that shape this particular form of media power. Are the megacorp and super app novel expressions of the digital economy, or logical extensions of longer corporate histories in Asia? Will nuanced accounts of megacorps allow us to steer clear of ‘Big Tech’ discourses that flatten critical distinctions between large technology firms and open markets? What role do nation-states play in choosing ‘national champions’ or reigning them in? How does the institutional form of megacorps predetermine the everyday experience of users and laborers in the age of super apps? These are some of the questions we address in this special issue.

**Media power and megacorps**

Business historians have long paid attention to the intersecting problem of technological development and corporate form. Alfred Chandler’s *Visible Hand* (1977), to take one of the most significant examples, charts the rise of the modern multidivisional corporation and a professional managerial class in the United States at the turn of the 19th century. These massive corporations required separate divisions to be run effectively and a new, university-trained managerial class who were professional mid- and upper-level managers. The size of these companies and their monopoly or oligopoly position led them to be dubbed, by economist and business historian Alfred S. Eichner, ‘megacorps’ (Eichner, 1968, 1969). That the term megacorp has seen a recent revival – TechCrunch, for instance, uses it to refer to Jio’s parent corporation Reliance (Wilhelm, 2020) – points to significant continuities between ideas of the monopoly corporation that animated work...
such as Eichner’s and discussions of Big Tech in Asia and other world regions. The megacorp is on the one hand a contemporary shorthand for the massive, conglomerated corporation. On the other hand, it is a specific analytic term used to account for the rise of the modern corporation. We will address the latter first, before turning to its contemporary manifestation in the age of super apps.

Eichner was an institutional economist who rebelled against the market-focused mainstream of economic thought in the U.S., emphasizing instead the institutions – particularly the massive corporations – that made the free market the fiction that it is. While political economists also emphasized corporate monopolies as part of a general tendency in capitalism, Eichner and Chandler took the view of institutional economy or business history to chart the emergence and development of the massive corporation that they saw as the dominant form of capitalism at the time. Chandler (1977) understood the megacorp as ‘giant enterprises that consolidated and internalized the property, personnel, and activities of a number of already large bureaucratic corporations’ (p. 147). Eichner, however, had a more specific understanding of the megacorp, finding Chandler’s ‘modern corporation’ moniker too general to capture the monopoly and oligopoly tendencies to which he wished to draw attention to. Explaining the reasons for coining the term, Eichner remarked: ‘The English language, usually so inventive, has so far failed to produce an adequate name for the institutional offspring of the corporate revolution’ (Eichner, 1968: 188). In his view, ‘corporation’ was too broad and ‘modern corporation’ too general. Megacorp was the alternative he suggested.

Focusing on the U.S., Eichner argued that the megacorp emerged in America between 1895 and 1907 when the monopoly form was consolidated and many modern corporations created. Born as a monopoly, consolidated after the anti-trust movements as oligopoly, the megacorp is the ‘large bureaucratic corporation’ that emerges from this moment of ‘organizational convulsion’ (Eichner, 1969: 1–2). Eichner offers four main characteristics of the megacorp:

1. ‘A megacorp means a corporation that is, first, sufficient in size to be included among the country’s 500 largest non-financial corporations as measured by either sales or assets – though this characteristic alone is not enough’. (Eichner, 1968: 188).
2. ‘The corporation must also be a multi-plant enterprise, and it must possess some degree of market power – that is, it must constitute a significant share of a relatively important industry into which the entry of new firms is made difficult by the existence of substantial market barriers. These barriers may take the form of control over raw materials, patented technological process, the large initial capital outlay required to build an efficient-sized plant, or the substantial sales expense necessary to penetrate a market in which advertising outlays have created intense brand loyalty’ (Eichner, 1968: 188).
3. There must be separation of management from ownership (Eichner, 1976: 19); recalling Chandler’s charting of the historical emergence of a professional managerial class separate from the owners of the corporation (Chandler, 1977).
4. The megacorp is a member of an oligopoly (Eichner, 1976: 19).
For Eichner, all these result in the market-manipulating mechanisms that we know as the monopoly (or oligopoly) firm, far removed from the free-market fantasies held by neoclassical economists dominant in Eichner’s day and neoliberals in our own. The account he offers is of the ‘institutional dimensions of “business as a system of power”’ (Eichner, 1968: 167). Fundamentally, Eichner understood megacorporation ‘as a dynamic, evolving, self-perpetuating entity determined to defend its position by control of the market, by control of technology, and by control of the market through technology’ (Kregel, 1990: 524). In what follows we extend this double focus on business and technology (and their contemporary cognates: platforms and super apps as simultaneously business forms and media technologies) as sites from which to examine media power in digital Asia.

Super apps: Definitions and geographies

The super app is a particular model of an app that assumes most functions of the smartphone can be done within either a single app or a suite of apps (Chen et al., 2018). Texting, voice and video calling, digital payments, news aggregation, ride-hailing, food delivery – the list of things doable within the single app is extensive. Super apps are super due to their ability to weave together functionalities and affordances, from music to ride hailing to money. The institutional size and negotiating power that allows these companies to convince music licensees, taxi companies, and banks to sit at their table must be considered a significant aspect of the super app phenomenon. They also enable forms of state capture or dependency. Considering these super apps as choke points within the platform economy – a role Goggin (2021: 58) associates with app stores – also allows us to consider the political and media effects of monopoly or oligopoly today.

To date, discussions around platforms and infrastructure have called attention to the essential, infrastructural nature of digital platforms (Plantin and de Seta, 2019; Plantin and Punathambekar, 2019). Apps and platforms have been studied from the angle of their cultural uses or their interfaces (Light et al., 2018); their methodological challenges (Avle, 2020; Dieter et al., 2019; Gerlitz, 2019; Morris and Murray, 2018); their racializing algorithms of oppression (Noble, 2018); the labor of content moderators behind our screens (Roberts, 2019); and their intersections with power distribution, including by the state (Dijck et al., 2018; Su, 2022). The ways apps mediate labor particularly within the gig economy context has been the source of excellent work within the Asian context in particular. Shifting attention to super apps means building on this research while also attending to the industry contexts that makes this relatively distinct form possible.

One immediately notable aspect of the rise of the super app is its Asian origins. There is a particular Asian lineage to this model, within which we can identify three notable variations: (1) the chat app origin super app (prominent in East Asia); (2) the delivery-and-transactional super app (prominent in Southeast Asia); and (3) the app family model of the super app (prominent in South Asia). To start with the chat app origin model, KakaoTalk (operated by Kakao Corporation and dominant in Korea, launched in 2010), WeChat (operated by Tencent, most dominant in China, launched in 2011), and LINE (operated by Naver Japan, a Japanese subsidiary of Korean search giant and tech company Naver, dominant in Japan, and launched in June 2011) were all released within a year of each other, and created a suite of super apps that started as chat apps, and borrowed, copied, and swapped
affordances, interface and features from each other (Steinberg, 2019, 2020). This super app model subsequently became a model for many companies – including Meta’s (Facebook) Messenger app (Nieborg and Helmond, 2019) – and others, albeit with limited success. The latest successful super apps to grab global attention tend to be from South Asia (the Jio family of apps) and Southeast Asia (Grab and Gojek as delivery-and-transactional super apps). Gojek began as a ride-hailing service but then branched out to provide food delivery and digital payments, and its super app aspirations are materializing because of transnational tie-ups with Facebook, PayPal, Google, and Tencent. One sees a similar story with Grab in Malaysia which has expanded beyond offering taxi booking services (originally ‘MyTeksi’) to providing financial services. Similar drives to incorporate myriad swaths of laborers in the informal economy within the ambit of formal and digital financialization services and transactions are underway in Southeast and South Asia (Athique and Baulch, 2019; Athique and Parthasarathi, 2020; Kumar, 2020). Rather than policing the boundaries of the super app, we embrace the diversity of its appearances.

These variants of the super app are connected by mutual borrowing but also financing; the models of WeChat-LINE-KakaoTalk are both inspirations for and often, via sources like SoftBank’s Vision Fund or Tencent, the source of their venture capital financing (Chai and Amaral, 2022; Mukherjee, 2019). That these developments imply transnational connections are made apparent in GoJek’s tie-up with e-commerce platform Tokopedia (now GoTo), made possible by financial investments from Japanese Softbank and Chinese Alibaba (Tani, 2021). Facebook/Meta offers further example of such transregional super app development in Asia. Meta’s WhatsApp messaging service is collaborating with Reliance Jio’s JioMart to onboard millions of small grocery/kirana store owners and retailers to chat and network with customers. In integrating e-commerce chat with mobile payments, WhatsApp becomes a super app enabling trade between customers and retailers. JioMart can use the location data to outcompete other e-commerce players in India. In its tie-ups with megacorps like Gojek and Jio, Facebook/Meta is eyeing the (mobile) digital payments space. These tie-ups suggest that super apps are not just a way for Big Tech to bundle services but also target users in populous countries with commercial services, where communications and monetary transactions are entangled.

The sprawling ambitions of the super app form thus require a broader understanding of digital capitalism. While ‘platform capitalism’ is most often considered in relation to data or rentierist models of capital accumulation (Sadowski, 2019, 2020), contemporary corporate forms as they impact media forms require urgent attention. Tencent, Alibaba, Reliance, or Kakao are not simply rent-seekers or surveillance capitalists. Rather, they are particular, concrete corporate forms that occupy real estate, organize labor, deliver infrastructures, negotiate with states and other corporations, regulate the public sphere, and shape the cultural and political environment. That these megacorps are also, from the perspective of normative ideas of the US tech firm, odd in their lineages, is equally worth noting. Jio was an energy giant before transforming itself into a telecommunications firm, and then more recently into a competitor in food delivery. Samsung started as a fish trading company, and SoftBank began as a software distributor that pivoted to being a telecom giant and more recently a venture capital operation. These examples are the norm, not the exception.
The origins and interests of each corporation determine the configuration of the digital environment in the markets that they dominate, and this is where their supporting interests in finance, industry, IT or telecoms are reflected in the affordances of their super apps as well as their impacts on cultural forms and everyday norms. The inflow of massive investments from other economic sectors into the digital space disrupts our understanding of where the boundaries of the media economy lie, with industrial, finance and retail giants rapidly acquiring vast swathes of the media industries to monopolize the content that will help them to populate their super apps. Equally, as massive national and transnational brands, these corporate identities cannot be considered apart from the symbolic space these companies now occupy in increasingly politicized national, regional (sub- or supra-national), or global mediascapes. The super app is one form in which these monopolies are experienced as a vernacular, everyday infrastructure; a condition for life; a means by which cultural forms such as music, news and movies are accessed today; and as a feeling of convenience.

**Megacorps now**

Like the market-distorting oligopolistic operators of Eichner’s formulation, the megacorps behind super apps are price-setting oligopolies that now produce their own marketplaces. They both shape markets and make markets (from sticker markets to ride-hailing markets to consumer-to-consumer seller markets), exceeding the powers even Eichner saw in megacorps. In some scholars’ estimation, megacorps are the marketplace and can be understood as emporiums (Athique, 2019), as ecosystems (Tiwary, 2020), or as the point of intersection between petty capitalism and platform capitalism (Zhang, 2020). For this reason, they also blur the distinction that Eichner assumes between financial and non-financial corporations. Super apps are in the business of finance; but financialization motivates movement around corporate ownership as well. Fintech is part of most super apps’ operations or aspirations. LINE, KakaoTalk, and especially WeChat have long made the channeling of financial transactions key to their success. Jio, GoJek and others similarly blur the line between financial and non-financial companies and would benefit from a lens to their actual finances (Jia and Winseck, 2018; see Jia, Nieborg and Poell in this issue). That the telecommunications giant turned venture capital fund SoftBank recently completed a merger of LINE with its subsidiary Yahoo Japan in order to consolidate their respective payment apps is yet more proof of the financialized megacorp behind the super app.

A further distinction from Eichner’s model is that megacorps today wield power via alliances as much as via the vertically owned ‘multi-plant’ operations of Eichner’s manufacturing-centric conception. Corporate alliances (for instance between LINE and the FamilyMart convenience store chain; Sony music; or other service providers) are crucial to how super apps function. Finally, while Eichner’s model implies a monolithic corporation, we should revisit Anna Tsing’s challenge to our sedimented understandings of ‘bigness’ (Tsing, 2009: 154–155), reminding us of the crucial heterogeneities – in labor, culture, corporate organization, and supply chains – that make up what we’re calling the megacorp today. Not only are these firms externally distinct, they rely on internal differentiation as well. For these parallels and with these crucial divergences in mind, we
should consider adopting the megacorp as an analytic relevant to this era of digital media power. We would thus amend Eichner’s model along these lines:

1. Digital megacorps dominate the stock markets in which they operate; yet they are not anchored solely in the U.S.
2. The size and prominence of megacorps create barriers of entry to any newcomers in their markets through the control of raw materials, through ‘patented technological process’, as well as through network effects, first mover advantage, and corporate mergers that lead to the technological and institutional lock-in that characterizes these markets.
3. The existence of a professional managerial class remains the case. That being said, many of the large tech companies’ founders are deeply involved in management – Ma Huateng/Pony Ma, the founder of Tencent; the Ambani family being the founders and current executives of Jio’s Reliance; and Son Masayoshi is the face of SoftBank. Succession (as the series of the same name dramatizes) is often a dramatic issue for such companies. The familial aspect for Reliance and the prominence of the tech entrepreneur figure separates these types of companies from the more faceless corporations of Eichner’s vision.
4. They are oligopolies at the very least, and often market monopolies in the national markets they operate in.

While Eichner’s work remains crucial, we also need to situate the emergence of these megacorps in relation to techno-orientalist frameworks that continue to shape current debates about technological development. It is significant that another genealogy of the megacorp comes via cyberpunk fiction from the 1980s onward. The cyberpunk imaginary features a faceless, massive Asian corporation that controls the world, reviving a deeply racialized, Rothschild-style paranoia and conspiracy theory – an imaginary that as Fredric Jameson points out is ‘fully as much an expression of transnational corporate realities as it is of global paranoia itself’ (Jameson, 1991: 38). This coexistence of the reality of the transnational corporation and its encoding in fictional-yet-real paranoia bears emphasizing. Cyberpunk was the fictional statement of the Japan-bashing anxieties of the 1980s, wherein Japanese corporations were figured as part of the faceless empire known as ‘Japan Inc.’ – alternatively praised and denigrated – that was to supplant American capitalism and displace the US automotive supremacy (Morris, 2013). With its rise as an economic power by the 2010s, China had replaced Japan as the target of xenophobic bashing.

Techno-orientalism projects Japan, China, or Asia as a site of futurity, robotics, or the inhuman, often reversing the temporal imaginary of classic orientalism (figured as past-tense) but hanging on to the racism that accompanies it (Morley and Robins, 1995; Ueno, 1999), or producing a hybrid temporality that simultaneously imagines Asia as the future alongside Asia as some kind of neo-feudalist, techno-bureaucratic state formation. The techno-orientalist imaginary of massive Asian megacorps and the anxieties they produced has been rebooted in Western public discourse toward imaging the danger of Chinese megacorps as allied with Chinese state power (Andrijasevic et al., 2021). This longer lineage of cyberpunk paranoia with China as the focal point now reveals enduring
anxieties about Asian economic dominance. This, finally, brings us to yet another twist to the megacorp concept: the ‘transnational corporate realities’ that Jameson also speaks of. Even as we must acknowledge its techno-orientalist imaginary, instead of dismissing the formulation, we can dig deeper to understand the market formations and longer industry histories to which this imaginary points.

From the legacies of Japan’s *zaibatsu*, now refigured as *keiretsu* business networks, to Korean *chaebols*, to Chinese tech giants and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), to India’s familial capitalism and digital emporium models that bear resemblance to the market sovereignty of the East India Company (Athique, 2019) – these do encourage us to contend with varied cultures of capitalism modulated by the institutional forms particular to national and regional contexts (Hall and Soskice, 2001). In other words, media and communication scholars need to steer clear of sweeping claims about platform capitalism and instead treat platform *capitalisms* in the plural, paying greater ‘attention to the complexity of the media industries’ in their real diversity (Winseck, 2011: 24) and, by extension, in their specific locations. If Silicon Valley-centric models of platform capitalism like that of Srnicek (2016) and critiques of Big Tech from the US context imply a model of universal capitalism, this may be an opportunity to take the institutional emphasis of Eichner seriously and more carefully consider the *particularities* of Asian megacorps and the *impacts* these have on contemporary forms of media power. Accounting for these trajectories of media and tech capital will also help us better understand the experiential dimensions of the super app as a cultural and technological form of monopoly capital operating in specific historical and geographical contexts.

**Platforming Asia**

Geographically this special issue’s focus is on Asia. As a vast region, Asia has internal heterogeneities, translocal solidarities and inequalities, continuities and disjunctures, diversities and differences. We center Asia with some caution, since the common default to Asia as an alternative to Silicon Valley typically entails setting up China as the sole counterpoint to Silicon Valley. This tends to create the image of a bipolar world, reiterating and reinforcing a neo-Cold War paradigm of US versus Chinese tech. But there are several ways to go beyond this bipolar world setting and its methodological impasses. The first is to look at lesser accounted for but nonetheless crucial, non-Chinese super apps or platforms such as LINE, KakaoTalk, Gojek, Grab, Jio, or others (Chai and Amaral, 2022; Jin and Yoon, 2016; Mukherjee, 2019; Qadri, 2021; Steinberg, 2020). The second is to treat China in a translocal manner, as Seyram Avle does in this issue in focusing on Chinese smartphone and tech company Transsion’s Africa-based strategy, pushing back against a simple model of exploitation or extraction sometimes adopted in useful, but unidirectional accounts of China in the world (Arboleda, 2020; Lee, 2017). The third is to complicate understandings of China’s technology operators, focusing, for instance as Li (2019) does, on the inter-ministerial rivalries around governance that show ‘China’ to be an always-heterogeneous ground of analysis (on this, see also Neves, 2020). This state-corporation relationship and its regulatory context is Zhang and Chen’s focus in this special issue. Jia, Nieborg and Poell similarly take up this real heterogeneity in focusing on the multiplicity of app stores in China. The fourth is to center India, an
increasingly important tech player in Asia (with grandiose plans for digital expansion amidst regional disparities and platform anxieties), as Athique and Kumar do.

The first decade of English-language platform studies (2010–2020) was conducted with the US and Silicon Valley-based platforms and apps as the analytic center. YouTube, Facebook, Google, Instagram were the objects of analysis and studied in an unmarked, and therefore US context. While there are notable exceptions (e.g.: ‘Regional Platforms’ in *Asiascape* 2017; ‘The Platformization of Chinese Society’ in *Chinese Journal of Communication*, Vol. 12 2019; or ‘Indian Media in the Platform Economy’ in *Media Industries*, Vol 6 issue 2, 2019), and an increasingly robust field of non-US platform research, more needs to be done to theoretically decenter North American platform studies. We need not only to shift the geography of analysis (bringing preformatted theory to a new milieu) but also bring in new tools, methods and vocabularies. In this special issue, we do so by foregrounding research on Asian platforms and their super app manifestations, centering Asia as a site for analyzing and theorizing digital platforms.

The scholars we bring together for this special issue have all made crucial contributions to existing knowledge around platforms in and/or around Asia. Contributors here dig deeper into platform analysis focusing on the super app, smartphone hardware, and the app store as key chokepoints where power is exerted over users and markets, in particular national contexts. Against the presumed globalism of accounts of the Apple Store or Google Play, interventions here focus on the specificities of local iterations of these stores. In so doing we start from the premise that there is no idealized universal app store or super app; there is no universal-particular relationship. There are only ‘local’ iterations or regional affinities. This *methodological localism* is in evidence in all of the contributions in this special issue, and the commitment to bypassing the limits of universalist platform theory informs the contributions here. Provincializing tech analysis proceeds alongside an attentiveness to what Chen (2010) calls inter-reference, particularly given regional super apps’ tendencies for mutual borrowing, copying, isomorphisms, and, in their own way, inter-reference. Attention to how tech companies work, particularly in Asia but also in Africa, is crucial to lending texture to accounts of Big Tech that focus only on FAANG, or only on experiences in an implied geopolitical *anywhere* that is always a *somewhere*.

Since its inception in the late 1970s, this journal has played a key role in shaping our understanding of the intersection of media and capital. Building on this history and tradition of taking stock of the political-economic dimensions of media and communication, we focus on the integral relationship between super apps and their telecommunications and media conglomerate backers. Drawing also on *Media, Culture & Society*’s commitment to hosting regional special issues – including special issues on India in 1989 (11:4), on Latin America in 1988 (10:4) on Western Europe in 1989 (11:1) – we contribute another account of media regionalism and corporate power – this time focusing on Asia. Difference and specificity as much as theoretical capaciousness guides our thinking here, and the intervention of each article in this issue. Here difference operates within the megacorp, between its divisions, within its distinct phases of development, and inside its super app manifestations and how these change over very brief timescales. Anna Tsing’s meditation on supply chain capitalism and her invitation to consider its ‘tapestries’ offers
us a reminder to address capitalism from the position of the diversity through which it operates rather than the homogeneity to which it is too often critically reduced:

Political theory almost never looks at tapestries. It is proud of its monocolor landscapes, which somehow seem more “theoretical” for their oversimplifications. Reading them from the United States, it is difficult not to associate such theoretical aspirations with the simplification of U.S. hegemony (Tsing, 2009: 173).

It is precisely these oversimplifications that this issue seeks to avoid. The tapestries Tsing refers to are ‘the full tapestry of gender, race, and national status’, to which we may add corporate history and media form. Capitalism and media power work through difference, as McMillan Cottom’s (2020) analysis of platform capitalism via racial capitalism also reminds us.

The emphasis on both super app and megacorp in this special issue does not – despite the claims to totality present in their superlative super- or mega-ness – reduce the real differences between these megacorps, within them, or within the everyday experiences they produce via their super app instances. Rather, each is an invitation to contend with the real complexities within each instance. To consider them in their specificity is also to reject what Tsing correctly identifies as tendencies of North Atlantic theorization to reinscribe the hegemonic position it writes from. To analyze the diversity of media power today is not to underestimate the real forms of control super apps and megacorps exert; it is to note that this control operates differently, and through this difference, at different moments in time and geography. This is a lesson that platform analysis particularly should take to heart, too-often focused as it is on the monocolor landscapes Tsing challenges us to abandon.

To this difference we might add another player thus far in the background of our discussions: the state. What is the role of the state here, in supporting or reigning in the super app and megacorp? How has this role changed over time? This is a question to which Winseck (2011) draws attention and one that Zhang and Chen engage with in their chapter here. Again, within Asia we instinctively find diversity rather than uniformity, as each state develops distinct relations with its megacorps – sometimes antagonistic, sometimes cozy, sometimes both at distinct moments in time. At the same time, we find some common tendencies toward a state that collaborates with or underwrites the super app – from Reliance’s compact with the Modi regime to WeChat’s emergence in the protected sphere created by the Chinese state before the latter turned to greater regulation in the period under consideration. Each case, though, shows a markedly different model of state-megacorp interactions than those presupposed in writings that focus on a sometimes-idealized regulatory function of the state in the US or EU contexts where the state is treated as a benevolent actor that is either apart from the platform or, more recently, needing to reign it in. In this context, terms like platform imperialism (Jin, 2013), while critically useful in analyzing Silicon Valley firms’ overweening global power, can also abet nationalistic rhetoric and agendas aimed at supporting ‘indigenous’ champions – from Jio to LINE to WeChat. Tracing the operations of power via super app and megacorp, their intersections with and the interventions of the state, and the mobilization of difference in each case under question is characteristic of much of the work undertaken by the contributors to this issue.
Athique and Kumar open this issue by tracing the conglomerations and acquisitions in Indian megacorp Reliance Industries Limited’s operations beginning in polyester and textile through petroleum refining to having a contemporary digital media and platform subsidiary Jio. The authors emerge with an innovative multi-scalar and multi-level analysis of Reliance Jio thinking across ‘capital interests’ (the digital megacorp), ‘business models’ (super platform), and the sensuous marketplace ‘interface’ (of ‘super apps’ or suite of apps). In some aspects, the authors note that Reliance Industries Limited’s operations conform to Eichner’s megacorp tenets, especially in the way Reliance has parlayed its position to dominate the Indian telecom and digital platform landscape. However, Athique and Kumar explain that since Reliance, like several other Indian conglomerates, remains very much a family-run business, the categorical separation of ownership and management that Eichner formulated for megacorps (and that Silicon Valley tech firms seem to assiduously follow) simply does not hold for Reliance. Balancing the state-megacorp relation remains important for Jio as it attempts to at once cozy up to the Indian ruling regime and be a national digital champion harnessing the vast Indian population’s data, even as it depends on foreign ‘Western’ technology to expand infrastructural projects and software capabilities.

Next, Zhang and Chen turn our attention to changes in the state-megacorp relationship over time in the Chinese context. In ‘A Regional and Historical Approach to Platform Capitalism: The Cases of Alibaba and Tencent’, Zhang and Chen submit these two megacorps and massive players in Chinese platform capitalism to rigorous historical review, tracking changes from the 1990s to the present. A 30-year period that is all the longer considering the pace of change under internet time, the piece tracks the emergence and development of Tencent and Alibaba in relation to the state. In doing so the article offers a historical account of ‘how platform capitalism in China, within the logic of the state-led economy, has navigated from the periphery to the center of Chinese state capitalism, while subjected to the regulatory pendulum of the state’.

Jia, Nieborg and Poell follow this account by homing in on the ways Tencent operates in China, particularly using its app store as a site of power, on the one hand, and deploying a strategy of using contents to attract users to the platform, on the other. This latter strategy in particular marks Tencent as a media conglomerate as well as tech giant; an unusual position from the perspective of US platforms, but one that will be familiar to those who have tracked the imbriication of tech firms (platforms) and content providers (media corporations) in East Asia (e.g. Jin, 2022; Steinberg, 2019). This emphasis on conglomeration and financialization offer a novel analytic that brings out the specificity of Tencent’s operations.

Finally, Avle focuses on the often-overlooked role of hardware in the platform economy. Focusing on the midsize Chinese transnational company Transsion’s operations in several African nations (and in Ghana in particular), Avle argues for the importance of low-cost hardware (in the form of mobile handsets) in shaping the datafication and platformization of everyday life in most of the world, that is, the Global South. Transsion may not be on the scale of other megacorps considered in this special issue, but as Avle points out, it is the dominant handset manufacturer on the continent, giving it outsized influence on users’ everyday lives. Through extensive fieldwork research of the socio-technical practices through which Transsion advertises, sells, produces, and distributes...
its products in association with African entrepreneurs, workers, and consumers, this essay emphasizes the need to understand the co-constitutions of hardware and software, smart devices and apps, camera technologies and computational face recognition algorithms. Her account suggests that hardware itself may be the overlooked ‘super app’ – the means by which social transformations are bundled with hardware affordances.

Together these articles offer a robust if necessarily preliminary expansion of the scope and scale of the super app and megacorp concepts in addressing contemporary configurations of media power in Asia and beyond. Given the rapid transformations of the tech landscape even over the course of editing this special issue, we look forward to more work to come. Tracking the shifts in the operations of media power in digital Asia remains an ongoing and politically pressing task for media and communication scholars.

Funding
The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Marc Steinberg received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to support this project.

ORCID iD
Marc Steinberg https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6560-2980

References
Andrijasevic R, Chen JY, Gregg M, et al. (2021) Media and Management. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
Arboleda M (2020) Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction Under Late Capitalism. Brooklyn: Verso.
Athique A (2019) Digital emporiums: Platform capitalism in India. Media Industries Journal 6(2): 67–87. DOI: 10.3998/mij.15031809.0006.205
Athique A and Baulch E (2019) Digital Transactions in Asia: Economic, Informational, and Social Exchanges. London: Routledge.
Athique A and Parthasarathi V (2020) Platform Capitalism in India. Chams: Palgrave Macmillan (Global transformations in media and communication research: A Palgrave and IAMCR Series).
Avle S (2020) Radio via mobile phones: The intersecting logics of media technologies in Ghana. Media Culture & Society 42(5): 789–799.
Chai R and Amaral P (2022) Is Grab, the Asian Superapp, Leveraging Digital Innovation for Good? London: SAGE. DOI: 10.4135/978152979797312.
Chandler AD (1977) The Visible Hand. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Chen K-H (2010) Asia as Method. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Chen Y, Mao Z and Qiu JL (2018) Super-Sticky WeChat and Chinese Society. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
de Kloet J, Poell T, Guohua Z, et al. (2019) The platformization of Chinese society: Infrastructure, governance, and practice. Chinese Journal of Communication 12(3): 249–256.
Dieter M, Gerlitz C, Helmond A, et al. (2019) Multi-situated app studies: Methods and propositions. Social Media + Society 5(2): 1–15.
Dijck JV, Poell T and Waal MD (2018) The Platform Society : Public Values in a Connective World. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Eichner AS (1968) Business and the Market Mechanism. In: Berg IE (ed.) The Business of America. New York, NY: World, pp.167–200 (The Harbrace series in business and economics).

Eichner AS (1969) The Emergence of Oligopoly: Sugar Refining as a Case Study. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Eichner AS (1976) The Megacorp and Oligopoly: Micro Foundations of Macro Dynamics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gerlitz C (2019) Apps and infrastructures—A research agenda. Computational Culture 7: 1–28.

Goggin G (2021) Apps: From Mobile Phones to Digital Lives. Cambridge: Polity.

Hall PA and Soskice DW (2001) Varieties of Capitalism: The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heath A (2021) Rise of the Super App. The Verge, November 1. Available at: https://www.theverge.com/22738395/social-media-super-app-facebook-wechat-shopping

Herbert D, Lotz AD and Punathambekar A (2020) Media Industry Studies. Cambridge: Polity.

Jameson F (1991) Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jia L and Winseck D (2018) The political economy of Chinese internet companies: Financialization, concentration, and capitalization. International Communication Gazette 80(1): 30–59.

Jin DY (2013) The Construction of Platform Imperialism in the Globalization Era. tripleC 11(1): 145–172.

Jin DY (2022) Understanding Korean Webtoon Culture: Transmedia Storytelling, Digital Platforms, and Genres. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.

Jin DY and Yoon K (2016) Reimagining smartphones in a local Mediascape: A cultural analysis of young KakaoTalk users in Korea. Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies 22(5): 510–523.

Kregel JA (1990) The integration of micro and macroeconomics through macrodynamic megacorps: Eichner and the “Post-Keynesians”. Journal of Economic Issues 24(2): 523–534.

Kumar A (2020) Deriving a tangible promotional calculus: Platform Monopolies and political advertising. Media International Australia 176: 52–65.

Lee CK (2017) The Specter of Global China: Politics, Labor, and Foreign Investment in Africa. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Light B, Burgess J and Duguay S (2018) The walkthrough method: An approach to the study of apps. New Media & Society 20(3): 881–900.

Li L (2019) Zoning China: Online Video, Popular Culture, and the State. Cambridge: Press, (Information policy series). Available athttps://ieeexplore.ieee.org/servlet/opac?bnumber=8925388

McMillan Cottom T (2020) Where platform capitalism and racial capitalism meet: The Sociology of race and racism in the Digital Society. Sociology of Race and Ethnicity 6(4): 441–449.

Mohan S and Punathambekar A (2019) Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives From South Asia. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Morley D and Robins K (1995) Techno-orientalism: Japan panic. In: Morley D and Robins K (eds) Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries. London: Routledge, pp.147–173.

Morris JW and Murray S (2018) Appified: Culture in the Age of Apps. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Morris N (2013) Japan-Bashing: Anti-Japanism Since the 1980s. London: Routledge.

Mukherjee R (2019) Jio sparks Disruption 2.0: infrastructural imaginaries and platform ecosystems in “Digital India”. Media Culture & Society 41(2): 175–195.

Neves J (2020) Underglobalization: Beijing’s Media Urbanism and the Chimera of Legitimacy. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Nieborg DB and Helmond A (2019) The political economy of Facebook’s platformization in the mobile ecosystem: Facebook Messenger as a platform instance. *Media Culture & Society* 41(2): 196–218.

Nieborg DB and Poell T (2018) The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society* 20(11): 4275–4292.

Noble SU (2018)* Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* New York, NY: New York University Press. Available at: https://nyupress.org/books/9781479837243/

Plantin JC and de Seta G (2019) WeChat as infrastructure: The techno-nationalist shaping of Chinese digital platforms. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12: 257–273.

Plantin JC and Punathambekar A (2019) Digital media infrastructures: Pipes, platforms, and politics. *Media Culture & Society* 41(2): 163–174.

Qadri R (2021) Platform workers as infrastructures of Global Technologies. *Interactions (ACM.org)* 28: 32–35.

Roberts ST (2019)* Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sadowski J (2019) When data is capital: Datafication, accumulation, and extraction. *Big Data & Society* 6(1): 1–12.

Sadowski J (2020) The Internet of landlords: Digital Platforms and new mechanisms of rentier capitalism. *Antipode* 52(2): 562–580.

Smieck N (2016)* Platform Capitalism.* Malden, MA: Polity.

Steinberg M (2019)* The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Consumer Internet.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Steinberg M (2020) LINE as Super App: Platformization in East Asia. *Social Media + Society* 6(2): 1-10. DOI: 10.1177/205630512093328.

Su C (2022) Contingency, precarity and short-video creativity: Platformization Based Analysis of Chinese online screen industry. *Television & New Media*. Epub ahead of print 23 April 2022. DOI: 10.1177/15274764221087994

Tani S (2021) SoftBank and AliBaba take top stakes in Indonesia’s GoTo. *Nikkei Asia*, May 20. Available at: https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Technology/SoftBank-and-Alibaba-take-top-stakes-in-Indonesia-s-GoTo

Tiwary I (2020) Amazon Prime Video: A platform ecosphere. In: Athique A and Parthasarathi V (eds) *Platform Capitalism in India*. Chams: Palgrave Macmillan (Global transformations in media and communication research: A Palgrave and IAMCR Series), pp.87–106.

Tsing A (2009) Supply chains and the human condition. *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society* 21(2): 148–176.

Ueno T (1999) Techno-orientalism and media-tribalism: On Japanese animation and rave culture. *Third Text* 13(47): 95–106.

Van Alstyne MW, Parker GG and Choudary SP (2016) Pipelines, platforms, and the new rules of strategy. *Harvard business review* 94(4): 54–62.

Wilhelm A (2020) An unsurprising wave of video-focused startups is trying to make video calls better. *TechCrunch*, 17 July. Available at: https://social.techcrunch.com/2020/07/17/an-unsurprising-wave-of-video-focused-startups-is-trying-to-make-video-calls-better/ (accessed 27 February 2022).

Winseck D (2011) The political economies of media and the transformations of global media industries. In: Jin D and Winseck D (eds) *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*. London: Bloomsbury, pp.19–56.

Zhang L (2020) When platform capitalism meets Petty Capitalism in China: Alibaba and an Integrated Approach to platformization. *International Journal of Communication* 14: 114–134.