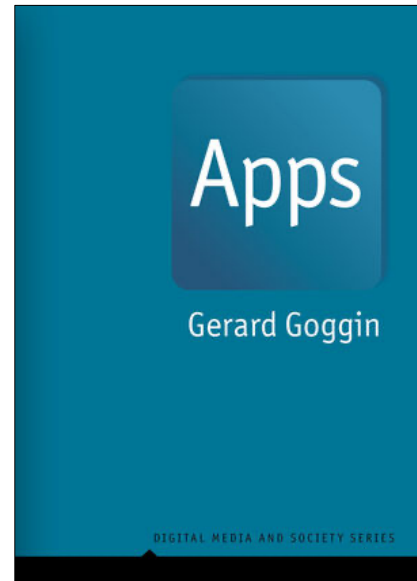


Gerard Goggin, **Apps: From Mobile Phones to Digital Lives**, 2021, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 166 pp., \$23.95 (paperback), \$64.95 (hardcover), \$18.00 (e-book).

Reviewed by
Jessica Roberts
Catholic University of Portugal

Apps: From Mobile Phones to Digital Lives, by Gerard Goggin, offers a guide to readers interested in better understanding apps as software, but also an introduction to their impact on politics and cultural economy, geopolitical shifts, media innovation, and social change. The book begins by laying a foundation for the discussion of the importance of apps, providing a working definition, explaining how they work, and giving historical context. The author conceives of apps as a pivotal development between two stages of media—a hinge between mobile societies of the late 20th century and the pervasive and immersive digital society of the 2010s. The starting point for this historical review is the 1980s and the first use of the phrase “killer apps,” and then the introduction and adoption of smartphones, which Goggin calls the “key hardware” (p. 17) for apps, beginning with PDAs.



Next, Goggin provides an overview of the app economy, mostly explaining the app store, how apps are made, and how apps generate revenue. This includes a discussion of the huge market for apps in China. The next two chapters of the book examine app media—including games, location, realities, images, moving images, sound, voice, and messages—and social apps, such as health and well-being apps, money and shopping apps, and dating and hookup apps. These chapters delve into more specific apps and their impact, including controversial questions raised by some, such as the concern about the Chinese government’s potential to access users’ data on Grindr when the app was acquired by the Chinese firm Kunlun Tech. The book closes with an overall assessment of what we know about apps, a look ahead, and a consideration of governing apps.

Goggin writes that the book is geared toward university students of all levels from undergraduate to doctoral. As it aims to provide a “theoretically informed state-of-the-art account for researchers who study apps across a range of disciplines and fields” (p. 3), it would provide a good starting point for scholars interested in the current literature on apps. It may be even more properly suited to a general audience looking to understand the tools they use every day.

Apps have become ubiquitous in much of the developed and the developing world, with the widespread adoption of smartphones or “hybrid” or feature phones. Apps reach across areas of our lives from transportation to weather, education to gambling, dating to banking, and beyond, prompting Goggin to refer to them as kaleidoscopic in nature. Because of their diverse uses and design, the study of apps cuts across fields ranging from communication to psychology, sociology to economics, and law. Studying apps is perhaps as ambitious as studying the impact of digital media, computers, or the Internet. Nonetheless, this

book provides a broad overview of apps, drawing on several years of research and theorizing about apps and their impact on culture and society.

This text is so broad in its scope and ambition that it, at times, necessarily glosses over huge issues with just a single sentence or paragraph, such as in chapter 2, when the author spends one paragraph each on location data, health data, cloud-based data, transactional data, and leaks (pp. 22–24). Later in the chapter, two paragraphs cover the use of apps by children and for education and related purposes. For this reason, the book offers a good starting point for studying apps, but an insufficient examination of all the major issues raised by and related to apps. Readers may find it necessary to turn to other texts that might provide more rich, nuanced, and detailed consideration of the complexity of the issues raised by apps.

Much of the book's discussion of apps is descriptive rather than analytical. So, it will likely be of use and interest to those trying to learn about the field in a broad way, rather than those seeking to understand more difficult questions about the influence, use of, and role of apps. There is little examination of the negative effect of apps making incursions into our lives, in terms of privacy, time and attention, or emotional/psychological impact, until later chapters, when Goggin finally mentions concerns about how data gathered from health and well-being apps are used. The discussion of the app economy does not incorporate political economy or seriously consider concerns about the concentration of media companies and the dominance of the same few major companies in the tech industry.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer a more in-depth examination of a few categories of apps, their history, and their significance, although still with the more descriptive approach of the rest of the book. For example, gamification is discussed, but in largely positive terms, without critical reflection on or consideration of the negative effects or questions about the benefits for companies and the exploitation of users. Regarding visual apps, Goggin writes, "Apps play a crucial role in the user and system experimentation and entrenchment of algorithms, as a visual cultural gateway to engaging, experiencing, and ordering social media cultures" (p. 98), but does not further explain this statement. Chapter 5 discusses social apps, including health and well-being apps, money and financial apps, and dating and hookup apps. Because of their role in shaping society and our daily lives, Goggin dubs these "social laboratories" (p. 119). This chapter provides the most thorough analysis of the complicated impact of apps on our lives, for example of the "complex, lucrative, and uneven developments in mobile money" (p. 136) and concerns about inequality and exclusion raised by dating and hookup apps.

Providing a critical perspective is perhaps not the primary aim of this book, so readers looking for that kind of approach to apps and their incursion and incorporation into our lives may find other texts more useful. The book does, however, include frequent references to other research and texts, pointing readers to useful resources to continue their study of apps. One strength of the text is its truly international scope; so much of media research is focused on North America and Europe, but this text frequently turns to China and India, where more than a billion mobile phone and app users live, and the Global South.

Other texts that take on the topic of apps include Miller and Matviyenko's (2014) *The Imaginary App*, and Morris and Murray's (2018) *Appified: Culture in the Age of Apps*. Both texts include contributions from dozens of authors, which may give them a more well-rounded perspective, but which also means that they are

more wide-ranging than this text. Given that *The Imaginary App* was published seven years before this book, it captures a different technological and cultural moment. *Appified* examines a series of individual apps, placing each within a wider historical and cultural context, but does not offer the same overview of apps as a technology as this book does. *Appified* may be a useful text to take a deeper dive into specific apps, after reading *Apps* to get a sense of the technology and field of study as a whole. One of the main advantages of *Apps*, in our constantly evolving media landscape, is simply that it has been published most recently and is, therefore, able to offer a more up-to-date assessment of apps, including discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A comparable book, although not focused on apps, is Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy's (2022) *Platforms and Cultural Production*. That text addresses many of the same issues, ranging from markets, infrastructure, and governance, to labor, creativity and democracy, while maintaining a focus on the intersection of platforms and cultural production that allows it to give the necessary attention to each topic.

Overall, *Apps* offers a broad view of apps as tools, communication media, and social laboratories, giving enough historical context to help readers understand how apps developed out of and fit into the context of other information communication technologies. This book would serve as a useful starting point for students, scholars, and members of the general public (presumably app users) interested in studying apps and looking for a map of the general landscape of the field of study. In the book's final chapter, Goggin writes, "the bulk of the world's citizens, users, communities, and publics use apps and are deeply invested in them, or are markedly affected by apps even when they don't use them" (p. 165) and he calls for radical alternatives to apps and an app-agnostic debate on the future of apps. Reading his book is probably necessary but not sufficient for those interested in participating in such a debate.

References

Miller, P. D., & Matviyenko, S. (Eds.). (2014). *The imaginary app*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Morris, J. W., & Murray, S. (2018). *Appified: Culture in the age of apps*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.