

A Service as Easy as Ordering Takeout: Tech, Start-Ups, and the Business Ontology

JENNIE ROSE HALPERIN

ABSTRACT

The theorist Mark Fisher describes “the business ontology” as a dominant political orientation where “It is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run like a business.” This pervasive viewpoint has infiltrated every aspect of culture, including and particularly government services. This paper explores the business ontology surrounding digital government services, from the Obama-era USDS technocracy to DOGE’s current kleptocratic power grab alongside the history of the phrase “government should work like a business.” I also reflect on my own experience as a technologist in the age of “doing work that matters” as part of open source startup communities and “women in tech” gatherings during the nascence of online government services. In startup parlance, the central fact of government bureaucracies behaving like bureaucracies are “features not bugs,” and we must resist the fundamental misalignment of incentives between government and capital by moving public services more firmly into the public sector, with a strong orientation toward justice and service to communities, not customers.

Government Should Act Like a Business?

While for some, the latest, aggressive turn toward fascist-leaning authoritarianism feels shocking, public servants and community advocates have confronted an increasingly undemocratic milieu in their own communities for years. Librarians and educators bear the brunt of this, as book bans and other forms of neo-censorship have formed a playbook at the center of the current culture wars over identity and bodily autonomy (Library Futures 2025). The playbook usually involves harassment on social media, a barrage of illegitimate and illegal demands and orders at a local administrative level, state-level censorship bills, and expensive lawsuits. There is currently chaos within the federal government as threats, moving targets, mis- and disinformation, and billionaire entitlement to public bureaucracies take over the day-to-day operations of the administrative state. The chaotic shock and awe playbook at the federal level resembles the neo-censorship playbook in more ways than one, but even after years of attacks, the public sector’s response remains weak.

A fundamental issue at hand is that the American public is increasingly brazen in its treatment of public bureaucracy as scrip for service, and the power of the private monied individual has become more pronounced. Trust in government has always followed party lines and

like most issues, it has diverged and become more partisan over time (Anderson and Rainie 2022). While it is commonly understood that liberals tend to put more trust in government, it generally varies by administration. Liberals trust more during Democratic administrations, and Republicans trust more during Conservative administrations. But trust overall has gone down, with only 34 percent of Democrats trusting the government during the Biden administration, and 11 percent of Republicans, as compared with 61 percent of Republicans and 35 percent of Democrats twenty years prior during the Bush administration.

One of the most obvious changes from 2004 to the present is computerization and the rise of tech oligopolies. Obama, the first “digital” president, brought a “start-up mentality” to the federal digital service that is now being weaponized. The Obama-era technocratic imaginary was one in which “politics isn’t really about opposing material interests or even clashing ideological preferences. It’s about problems that are solved when the best, smartest, and most dedicated people come together to devise the cleverest solutions” (Burgis 2024). But the government is not a set of problems to be solved, and the complexity of most public bureaucracies cannot be handled like a start-up or business problem. As a case in point, look at the many terrible “solutions” for the public sector put forward by consulting firms like McKinsey, Bain, and Deloitte, from botching France’s COVID vaccine rollout to deep and unethical entanglements with the Saudi government. While the “McKinsey way” might arguably work to bail out troubled companies, its reliance on business logic ultimately perverts the purpose of government. As Mariana Mazzucato and Rosie Collington write, “In government, big consultancies promoted and profited massively from the push toward privatization, management reform, private financing, outsourcing, digitalization, and austerity” (Mazzucato, M., and R. Collington 2023).

The scholar and theorist Mark Fisher coined the term “business ontology” in 2009 in the book *Capitalist Realism*. In this framework, “It is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run like a business.” “It is worth recalling,” he continues,

that what is currently called realistic was itself once “impossible”: the slew of privatizations that took place since the 1980s would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier, and the current political-economic landscape (with unions in abeyance, utilities and railways denationalized) could scarcely have been imagined in 1975. (Fisher 2009, 17–18)

Although echoes of “running the government like a business” can be found in early twentieth-century writing on public administration and took shape over the years, the modern conception of government “acting like a business” was first put forward by Ronald Reagan. In “Running Government Like a Business . . . Then and Now,” Jon D. Michaels writes, “Modest calls during the 1990s and early 2000s to ‘reinvent government’ have given way to more insistent cries to run government like a business — to harness the principles, practices, and infrastructure of the market economy to save money, increase efficiency, overhaul the bureaucracy, and reduce so-called red tape.” Michaels’s article discusses how the nascent twentieth-century administrative state understood the “specialness” of public bureaucracy, discussing Nicholas Parillo’s book on the professionalization and salarization of government employees. “In this rush to re-embrace business-like government, we’re either forgetting or affirmatively repudiating the principles and practices that legitimized American public

administration as a distinct normative and legal enterprise,” he writes (Michaels 2015). The professionalization of the bureaucratic class is a decidedly *public* way to run a public bureaucracy, one in which, he writes, government runs like a government.

Ninety-three percent of Trump voters claimed that “the economy” was a primary reason for their vote in November’s presidential election (Doherty et al. 2024). Drilling down, a not insignificant number of these voters claimed that they trusted Trump because he is “a successful businessman.” Even though Trump’s businesses are not successful by any actual metric, this perception of success carried voters to the polls, and those voters elected their “change candidate” whose administration took the reins of the economy in an era marked by extreme wealth inequality (Inequality.org 2025).

Michaels writes that the new wave of “running government like a business” stems from post-World War II reforms concerned with issues of agency capture, bureaucratic drift, and waste understood through an oppositional lens to collectivism, socialism, and communism. These reforms ultimately served to destabilize the three pillars of the American administrative state: salarization (or professionalization), tenure, and public participation. While these three elements of public administration are crucial to its workings, his argument overlooks the ways in which public administration theory is bound up in Taylorism and other business theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The argument that government is “special” and should therefore not be run like a business is persuasive to experts but difficult to explain to a public that sees government as wasteful, bureaucratic, and unresponsive. In this public imaginary, firms are seen as competent market players and responsive to people’s needs because they depend on profits to survive. But firms can fail, they can make corporate decisions that are antithetical to human flourishing in the service of capital, and they can suddenly close without warning. While governments and administrative states can make decisions that are antithetical to human flourishing—the carceral system, the genocide in Gaza, any number of dictators or oppressive regimes—none of these decisions are made in service of profit, with exceptions made for autocratic enrichment, much like we have seen in the new administration. The government can also never close shop, no matter how hard the current administration tries to do so. Even nonprofits and NGOs operate significantly differently than governments: Unlike NGOs, governments can never focus on a single problem, and they are funded by their constituents rather than foundations or the wealthy.

The approach to “running government like a business” over the past forty years has been to outsource or privatize individual government capacities, for example, the rise of charter schools over public education or the rise of insured 401(k)s over government-backed pensions. The first pillar, professionalization, can be undermined by moving government tasks to private companies, which serves to bring into question the legitimacy and neutrality of the administrative state by outsourcing traditional government tasks to private actors. While the prevailing logic is that the profit motive is the only incentive to succeed or produce at work, this has not been borne out by over one hundred years of professionalized government. The second pillar, tenure, is playing out in the potential reorganization of government under the second Trump administration. Tenure fosters political insulation as administrators move from regime to regime without halting their job responsibilities. Even though the roots of public administration lie in the hyper-hierarchical Taylorized business approach, agencies tend to be significantly less hierarchical and controllable than businesses. A nontenured workforce under threat of being fired is much more likely to make unsound decisions at the urging of an administrative head or corporation rather than a professionalized civil service with a culture

of checks and balances to power. Destroying the final pillar, public participation, is perhaps the most dangerous. Public participation, which often causes red tape or bureaucratic slow-down, is nonetheless crucial to a functioning bureaucracy. Private firms are not subject to the same rules as federal agencies that are intended to keep people safe, like the right to privacy, freedom of information, or participation in rulemaking. A government without public participation is, like capitalism, a system that is accountable to no one.

A Personal Coda

I went to library school shortly after college because I could not find a job in the post-2008 recession economy. I wanted to become an academic, but I needed a job that would allow me to slough off economic precarity. My goal was to work in public libraries or as an archival researcher, but those jobs were hard to get and paid poorly.

Tech was everywhere in 2012-13; everyone seemed to be promising women (mostly white women) that learning to code would change their lives. Tech people believed that librarians were “secret coders,” and library schools started to offer classes in Python, Human-Computer Interaction, and User Experience. I took some coding classes and found that I was interested in computers, though largely on a theoretical level. I found coding difficult, overly literal, and boring. But I was persistent and scrappy enough to get hired at Mozilla in a paid internship program for Women in Tech. I worked three jobs and attended classes until I got hired full time in spring 2014.

That summer, I attended a women’s tech conference called Ada Camp in Portland, OR. I felt like we were regressing into second-wave capitalist feminism as mostly white women talked about the “pipeline” for women in tech, urging us to get jobs at big start-ups, Google, or Facebook to improve representation without intersectionality or critique of capital. I went to a local PyCamp, where I was the only female attendee. I was so violently harassed by multiple men that I had to file a formal complaint. I did all the modules on Code.org and took a few classes until my coding skills became serviceable. I felt like I was, as Anna Weiner writes in her memoir *Uncanny Valley*, “not really a woman in computing—more a woman around computing; a woman with a computer” (Weiner 2020).

Over the course of about eighteen months, until I was reorganized out, Mozilla paid for me to travel to give talks at their various offices, attend community meetups, and become a coding instructor with a curriculum that I later adapted for information professionals. The first time Mozilla flew me to San Francisco in late 2013, I called my mother in disbelief. “There are so many snacks,” I told her. “And I’ve never stayed in such a nice hotel.”

Even though most of this work now seems pointless and even embarrassing, I fully believed that public good, open-source online communities were the future of computing. I have a photo of myself standing in front of a wall text in 2015 at my next job, a prominent publishing start-up. “Do work that matters,” it says. Never mind that we were hawking programming manuals, business books, and self-help guides.

I idolized the team at 18F and the US Digital Service (USDS), the newly formed “start-ups” within the federal government that were rethinking online services, investing in “open government,” understanding citizens as customers, and moving fast and breaking things as more government services digitized. Formed in the wake of the HealthCare.gov debacle, where the new Obamacare site crashed immediately upon launch, 18F was made up of tech experts who would “act as digital task forces to teach concepts like agile modern development

and deploy modern tech” as a “technology consulting firm” (United States Digital Service 2024).

The shiny new digital services they launched were supposed to transform people’s relationship with government services. Around the country, digital services teams were patterned after their model, bringing tech in-house, committing to open data dashboards, and partnering with volunteer organizations like Code for America. At the time, the White House wrote on their blog, “As technology continues to evolve, we will continue to look for ways we can strengthen our efforts along with it – to make sure we’re applying new and innovative tools as we continue working to expand opportunity for the American people” (Cobert et al. 2014). Despite being a “permanent part of the government” and somehow riding out the first Trump administration, in January 2025, USDS was renamed “the Department of Government Efficiency,” and at midnight on March 1, 2025, the 18F staff was abruptly fired (Meyer 2016).

From REGO to DOGE

The USDS and 18F team did an incredible amount of work to modernize government services and did ultimately save taxpayers an enormous amount of money. A blog post just two years after their founding lists thirty-four accomplishments ranging from “Streamlining VA disability compensation” to “Developing a common identity management platform” (United States Digital Service 2016). They wrote open, accessible guides for any number of tech processes, and they recruited some of the best tech talent in the country.

From the perspective of public administration, the USDS and 18F were part of a wave of global “open government” initiatives that took hold in the 2010s. Often called “new public governance” or “networked governance,” these new digital-first government initiatives aimed to bring transparency, efficiency, performance, and innovation to the public sector. There is a wide range of literature on the subject; scholars disagree on the name and aims of this moment in public administration, but it grew out of New Public Management, a series of 1990s-era reforms that focused on public/private partnership and brought a “business-like” or entrepreneurial lens to governance. NPM is the backbone of most of the Clinton- and Bush-era neoliberal reforms and was focused on public/private partnership and efficiency over democracy and participation, best typified through Clinton’s REGO (Reinventing Government). REGO, which ultimately cut 351,000 positions from the federal government, was positioned to “solve the ‘root problem’ of modern government—its excessive reliance on ‘large, top-down, centralized bureaucracies’” (Wolf 2024). REGO brought a “start-up mentality” to the federal government, ostensibly to improve participation and responsiveness and “cut red tape.” But, as James Q. Wilson writes in *Bureaucracy*,

putting people first is hard to do in a government that, ultimately, has the power to command people and even send them to prison. A business may put people first because businesses compete with each other in order to attract customers, but the government competes with nobody. And cutting red tape may be possible in a business firm that can tell whether it is doing a good job by looking at its sales and profits, but cutting it in a government agency is much harder because (ordinarily) government agencies deal with neither sales nor profits. (Wilson 2000, 1–2)

New Public Governance, the next phase in public administration, shared many of the elements of NPM but with a new focus on openness and transparency. On Obama's first day in office, he declared, "My administration is committed to an unprecedented level of openness in Government. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government" (Greve 2015). The market-based and efficiency elements of NPM, combined with the new focus on openness in NPG, were supposed to bring a greater emphasis on cross-sector collaboration and digital services. In their article "Developing New Public Governance as a Public Management Reform Model," Andreas Hagedorn Krogh and Peter Triantafyllou write, "NPM reforms aim to enhance public sector efficiency and performance by increasing market-based competition and performance management . . . while NPG reforms attempt to enhance public value creation by advancing collaborative relations across sectors and levels of society." But NPG lacks attention to the structure and reconfiguration of government, eliding the special ways in which management differs from business. This lack of attention to the structures of government has ultimately enabled many in the new administration's most problematic modes of takeover. As Rebecca Williams writes on *Tech Policy Press*,

From its start until it effectively transformed into DOGE, USDS leaders insisted that the agency must bypass bureaucratic processes to inject Silicon Valley innovation into government services. This marketing strategy has effectively shrunk the imagination in civic technology circles away from solving the root causes for poorly functioning government services—like complex means-testing and underfunding—to a narrower Overton window where administrative rules . . . are the main problem and technology is the only counterbalance to bad policy. (Williams 2025)

A primary issue with this mentality is that the problems that public bureaucracy solves are significantly more wicked than those of any start-up. Avinash Dixit writes,

In principle, all these principals can get together, negotiate their interests, and create one goal - a suitable weighted average of their distinct goals - that the agency would then be mandated to serve. The agency problem unavoidably created by information asymmetries and monitoring costs would remain, but the one-dimensional goal would make government bureaucracies more like firms, which are closer to having a single goal, typically profit. (Dixit 2012, 4)

Of course, this never happens. According to Wilson, "One cannot explain the behavior of government bureaucracies simply by reference to the fact that they are bureaucracies; the central fact is that they are government bureaucracies" (Wilson 2000, 125). Public bureaucracies, including libraries, have a few central attributes, summarized from the work of Wilson, Dixit, and other scholars:

1. The goals of public bureaucracy are usually vague. For example, while the USDS was ostensibly created to "improve digital services," there is no singular metric (like profit) that the service could fall back on to point to improvement. This is ubiquitous across all public bureaucracies. For example, if the goal of the library

is to provide access to materials, how do we judge that we have succeeded? If it is to increase literacy, how do we know that it is the impact of the library?

2. No government, library, school, or other public institution could possibly attain every metric mandated by the public and usually must choose a few. For example, the USDS chose “efficiency” over almost any other metric. When choosing technology, libraries cannot possibly weigh every single metric that could be important to their patrons. Generally, libraries must weigh the metrics of efficiency, cost, robustness, effectiveness, privacy, and other metrics and choose a few based on their judgment.
3. The primary reward of public bureaucracy is adherence to professional norms rather than profit. This means that incentives are limited, but derived pleasure from work is usually higher due to the professional’s feeling of purpose.
4. Public bureaucracy solves significantly more difficult problems than the private sector, and considering the two as equal creates an intense misalignment. For example, “improving literacy” is significantly more complicated than “selling more books to line Jeff Bezos’s pockets.” “Ending homelessness” is more complicated than “buying real estate.”

A chart reproduced below from Dixit’s lecture illustrates the inverse relationship between complexity and efficiency in markets, firms, and bureaucracies (2012, 6).

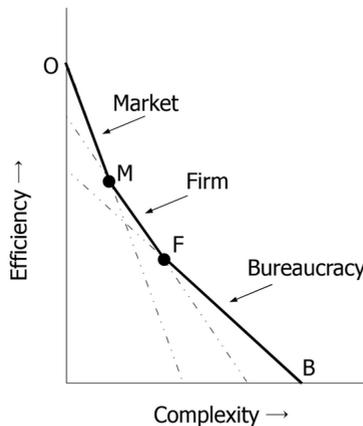


Figure 1 - Discriminating alignment of tasks and institutions

To be clear, in the words of start-ups, these attributes of public bureaucracies are “features, not bugs.” Despite the ubiquity of the “business ontology,” privatizing services in public bureaucracies almost always has the same outcome: Misaligned incentives lead to measurably poor outcomes. For example, the first HealthCare.gov was built by a patchwork of federal contractors, most notably CGI Federal Group of Canada. The costs spiraled to almost three times their estimate, and the site failed at launch (Anonymous 2016). While the rollout was blamed on the government agency’s procurement processes, the contractors and the govern-

ment were at cross purposes. While the government wished to offer a service to taxpayers, the contractors make their business on these contracts. There is an argument to be made that an on-time, effectively delivered project would eventually have led to more profit for the contractors due to more contracts, but most firms of this type operate with alarmingly short-term incentives. As Wilson writes,

Control over revenues, productive factors, and agency goals is all vested to an important degree in entities external to the organization -- legislatures, courts, politicians, and interest groups. . . . As a result, government management tends to be driven by the constraints on the organization, not the tasks of the organization. . . . [W]hereas business management focuses on the 'bottom line' (that is, profits), government management focuses on the 'top line' (that is, constraints)." (Wilson 2000, 115)

One does not need to look far afield for a library example. While vendors have set themselves up as friendly community members seeking to support libraries by selling them products, the behavior of vendors is nearly always in their self-interest. From Clarivate's recent decision to cease individual title sales to Hoopla's loading of AI-generated slop into their catalog to pad their offerings, profit always rules in the vendor landscape (Maiberg 2025). A rare example of the inverse has been the individual suits brought forward by the major publishers against the "book ban" legislation in multiple states. In challenging states, publishers are challenging censorship in an effective manner, often at great expense (Closson 2024). At the same time, these suits remain at least partially in the best interest of publishing companies—schools and libraries represent a significant amount of their revenue.

As Easy as Ordering Takeout

The internet is often analogized to a mall: free to enter, often the only place where young people can hang out, and a marginally public space. But ultimately, the purpose of a mall is capital. It is heavily surveilled and invisibly policed. In too many ways, the internet works like this as well, but while you would not expect to find essential digital services at the mall, the internet must serve multiple purposes. Rebecca Williams cites the example of civic technologists claiming that government digital services should be "as easy as ordering takeout" while pushing consumer tech solutions on their constituents. In a similar vein, the ebook vendor Overdrive's CEO Steve Potash has said, "Each week [we] curate the best ways each community can maximize their taxpayers' dollar . . . this is like coming into the front door of Costco" (Gross 2021).

To be clear, I am not advocating for ineffective civic tech or for libraries to stop providing digital services to patrons. But public bureaucracies should not be at the service of the market or the firm. Instead, we must commit ourselves to providing a robust understanding to the public of how library and government services work, be willing to step away from negotiations with bad market actors, invest in open-source and in-house technology, and transition our understanding of our patrons and users away from "customers" and toward citizens. The business ontology can be overcome if the future is faced with a strong orientation toward justice.

The Obama-era technocracy sought to bring a business mentality to government technology, complete with its misaligned profit incentives, leading to an even more pervasive sense that government should work like a business. The capture of USDS by the Department of Government Efficiency or the treatment of libraries as “bookstores but free” is a logical outcropping of digital services turning everyone into a customer. After years of privatization of government services, both digital and not, it is time to reclaim public bureaucracy for the public and reject the vision of Elon Musk, who recently said, “I think it’s a false dichotomy to look at government and sort of industry as separate . . . government is . . . the ultimate corporation” (Scipioni 2020).

References

- Anderson, J., and L. Rainie. 2022. *Visions of the Internet in 2035*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2022/02/PI_2022.02.07_Visions-of-the-Internet-in-2035_FINAL.pdf.
- Anonymous/ABC123. 2016. “The Failed Launch of www.HealthCare.gov.” Harvard Business School, November 18. <https://d3.harvard.edu/platform-rctom/submission/the-failed-launch-of-www-healthcare-gov/>.
- Burgis, B. 2024. “Obama’s DNC Speech Was the Same Old Technocratic Liberalism.” *Jacobin*, August 21. <https://jacobin.com/2024/08/barack-obama-dnc-speech>.
- Closson, T. 2024. “Major Publishers Sue Florida Over Banned School Library Books.” *The New York Times*, August 9. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/29/us/florida-book-ban-lawsuit.html>.
- Cobert, B., S. Vanroekel, and T. Park. 2014. “Delivering a Customer-Focused Government Through Smarter IT.” The White House: President Barack Obama, August 11. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/08/11/delivering-customer-focused-government-through-smarter-it>.
- Dixit, A. 2012. “Bureaucracy, Its Reform and Development.” Princeton University, February 3. <https://www.princeton.edu/~dixitak/home/VarmaLec2.pdf#:~:text=In%20principle%2C%20all%20these%20principals%20can%20get,to%20having%20a%20single%20goal%2C%20typically%20profit>.
- Doherty, C., J. Kiley, and C. Deane. 2024. “What Trump Supporters Believe and Expect.” Pew Research Center, November 13. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/13/what-trump-supporters-believe-and-expect/>.
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Zero Books.
- Greve, C. 2015. “Ideas in Public Management Reform for the 2010s. Digitization, Value Creation and Involvement.” *Public Organization Review* 15, 49–65. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11115-013-0253-8>.
- Gross, D. A. 2021. “The Surprisingly Big Business of Library E-Books.” *The New Yorker*, September 2. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-communications/an-app-called-libby-and-the-surprisingly-big-business-of-library-e-books>.
- Inequality.org. n.d. “Wealth Inequality in the United States.” Accessed April 1, 2025. <https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/>.
- Library Futures. 2025. *Neo-Censorship in U.S. Libraries: An Investigation Into Digital Content Suppression*. <https://www.libraryfutures.net/neocensorship-report>.
- Maiberg, E. 2025. “AI-Generated Slop Is Already in Your Public Library.” 404 Media, February 4. <https://www.404media.co/ai-generated-slop-is-already-in-your-public-library-3/>.

- Mazzucato, M., and R. Collington. 2023. "Consultants and the Crisis of Capitalism." *Project Syndicate*, March 2. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/consultants-bring-more-problems-than-benefits-by-mariana-mazzucato-and-rosie-collington-2023-03>.
- Meyer, R. 2016. "Obama's Tech Reforms Are Now Permanent." *The Atlantic*, May 5. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/05/18f-becomes-a-permanent-part-of-the-government/481260/>.
- Michaels, J. D. 2015. "Running Government Like a Business . . . Then and Now." *Harvard Law Review* 128 (4): 1152. <https://harvardlawreview.org/print/vol-128/running-government-like-a-business-then-and-now/#footnotes-container>.
- Scipioni, J. 2020. "Elon Musk: Government Is the 'Ultimate Corporation.'" CNBC, December 10. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/10/elon-musk-government-is-the-ultimate-corporation.html>.
- United States Digital Service (USDS). n.d. "How We Work." Accessed April 1, 2025. <https://www.usds.gov/how-we-work>.
- United States Digital Service. 2016. "Two Years of the U.S. Digital Service." Medium, August 9. <https://medium.com/the-u-s-digital-service/two-years-of-the-u-s-digital-service-e14af5ce713b>.
- Wiener, A. 2020. *Uncanny Valley: A Memoir*. MCD.
- Williams, R. 2025. "How Congress Can Delete DOGE." *Tech Policy Press*, February 26. <https://www.techpolicy.press/how-congress-can-delete-doge/>.
- Wilson, J. Q. 2000. *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It*, 2nd edition. Basic Books.
- Wolf, Z. B. 2024. "DOGE, Meet REGO. 32 Years Before Elon Musk, Al Gore Did It." CNN, December 6. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/06/politics/doge-musk-gore-rego-what-matters/index.html>.

Author

Jennie Rose Halperin (MPA, MLIS) is Director of Library Futures, a project of NYU Law's Engelberg Center on Innovation Law & Policy.