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The sign, beyond the signal. How the State, small businesses and a frog participated in labelling in the home retrofit market

Alexandre Mallard, Jean Francès and Aurélie Tricoire

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Introduction

The proliferation of labels meant to characterize market goods constitutes a significant evolution of the economy in the recent period.¹ Yet how do labels concretely acquire meaning and get recognized by market actors? Labelling is a matter of marking. It operates through affixing to products a name, an image, a logo or a symbol referring to specific considerations that market participants should take into account during transactions: the ‘greenness’ of products, their ethical conditions of production, the recommendation of some distinguished prescriber, etc. In this chapter, we would like to explore the processes through which the relationships between these marks and considerations emerge and develop. Our aim will be to qualify the collective work and the semiotic devices at stake in the enactment of the meaning of labels in markets and in public debates. We will argue that the labels’ agency should be understood through a concept of ‘sign’ that goes beyond that of ‘signal’, which is the notion usually mobilised in that matter. More precisely, we will suggest that two additional modalities of signifying should be taken into account in the apprehension of the labelling sign: that of the ‘message’ and of the ‘emblem’.

We will draw on the case of a label that was introduced by the French administration in the construction sector in the early 2010s to improve the quality of services offered in the home retrofit market: the ‘RGE’ label – we will explain the meaning of the acronym later.² This label was imagined in the context of a public policy striving to reinforce the awareness to the stakes of energy efficiency in the renovation of buildings. The development of a population of particularly skilled service providers – ‘RGE-labelled’ small businesses – was seen as a possible contribution to solving issues of sustainability that became more and more problematic. The history of RGE offers an opportunity to reflect on the way in which public authorities strive to establish and control the meaning of the labels that they implement in various domains of the economy. But the interest of this history goes much beyond the sole case of labels mobilised as market-based instruments in public policies. As the trajectory of RGE shows different moments where its meaning was transformed, subjected to dispute, public criticism and irony, it invites us to investigate the multifaceted processes of signifying at stake in market labelling in general.

The first part of the chapter recalls the role played by the notion of signal in the study of market labelling, and problematizes the shift to a more general notion of sign. In the second part, we will draw on some episodes of the history of RGE to explore usual questions of labelling that an analytics of the sign makes visible. The third section discusses characteristic aspects of the interplay between the three modalities of signifying involved in market labelling (‘signalling’, ‘messaging’ and ‘emblematising’) and briefly comments on the particular configuration of a public policy label such as RGE.

¹ The authors would like to thank their colleagues of the Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation for the rich comments they formulated on earlier versions of this text. The chapter has also benefitted from the help and comments of contributors to this volume. All the mistakes and inconsistencies remaining in the text are the responsibility of the sole authors. We also would like to thank ADEME, CAPEB, QUALIBAT and FFB for giving permission to reproduce the logos of labels in figure 1, 2 and 4, as well as Antoine Hudin for giving permission to reproduce the photograph in figure 3.

² This reflection is part of a broader research on labelling carried out in the frame of ‘LaPin’, a project funded by the French *Agence Nationale de la Recherche* between 2013 and 2017 (convention ANR-SOIN-0004-04). Participants to the project who have contributed to the empirical survey and to the reflection presented here are Jean Francès, Brice Laurent and Aurélie Tricoire. See Mallard et al, 2018.

From the signal to the sign

Strangely enough, we know very few things about the mechanisms of design, identification and appropriation of the names and logos that concretely incarnate labels in market transactions. While the consequences of the emergence of labelling have been studied at length and in various market contexts – as this volume shows – the concrete modalities through which the meaning of labels is shaped remains an under-researched topic. The lack of graphic illustrations and onomastic investigations in the articles and books populating the existing scholarship testifies to this gap in knowledge. The reason might be that most of what we know about the capacity of labels to signify is inherited from the economic perspective and has been apprehended through a category, that of ‘signal’, that pays poor attention to this dimension.

Labelling as signalling

Regardless of its disciplinary inscription, research on quality labelling is largely anchored in the seminal works of economists Georges Akerlof (1971) and Michael Spence (1973). Akerlof underlined the importance of the uncertainty on quality that was present in certain markets and of the necessity to overcome the ‘information asymmetry’ that populated them (the supplier knows more about the product than the buyer). Spence showed that specific categories of information displayed in the market by suppliers are prone to generate a signal enabling the buyers to distinguish between products of different quality. Although these research works didn’t deal with labels properly speaking, they laid the basis for their later analysis in the frameworks of neo-institutional economics or the economics of conventions: a label was conceived as a piece of information operating as a signal, that could be institutionalized in the market in order to explicitly guide all the actors in their transactions, help them to overcome information asymmetry and generate trust. This analytic orientation explains the plethora of research assuming that market signalling is the right framework to deal with labels (Caswell and Modjudska, 1996; Raynaud et al, 2002).

It seems to us that this analytical origin has influenced the study of labels deeply and much beyond economics properly speaking, and that a ‘paradigm of the signal’ is implicitly or explicitly at play even in the research performed by many sociologists and political scientists. In this paradigm, labels can be apprehended through the relationship between three pieces of information. The first concerns the features of the signal, e.g. the name and logo of the label; the second relates to the modalities of attribution of the label; the third concerns the interpretation of the signal by market actors.

Let us illustrate this informational nexus in our case. The acronym ‘RGE’ represents the *signalling information*, that is to say the information that, for instance, a homeowner would try to search for on the Internet when looking for a highly skilled heating installer to renovate his boiler. What we call the *attribution information* refers to the precise standardization and certification procedures through which a small business would be attributed with this distinction – in the case of RGE this information is available in an agreement designed by related professional organizations, specifying the requirements one has to fulfil in order to get the label. The *interpretation information* describes the considerations and beliefs that market actors associate with the display of this label – in our case a consumer might for instance think that

small businesses compliant with the RGE label are ‘highly skilled’, that they have a ‘good understanding of how to properly renovate a house’, etc.

We can formulate a few comments here. First, the efficiency of the signalling information is generally apprehended through the label’s reputation in the market, which in turn implies an active work of communication by its promoters. In their study on the use of labelling in the promotion of sustainable consumption and health programs, Bergeron et al (2014) for instance show that communicating through various information campaigns is an important part of the ‘governance by labels’.

Second, economists (and sociologists alike) pay great attention to the information of attribution, whose formal, explicit and procedural character deeply influences the ways in which a labelling process might transform a market. This character makes the difference between a label and a brand: while the brand also aims at sending a signal to market actors, there is usually no formal and publicly available list of specifications showing the expected characteristics of the product and the modalities of verification of their effective realisation (Valceschini and Mazé, 2000). By contrast, labels involves a whole infrastructure of procedures and documents intended to make attribution explicit and traceable, such as the standardisation, certification and accreditation schemes that underlie some of them (Loconto and Busch, 2010).

Third, interpretation information is usually not strictly identical to attribution information. It is common that market actors ignore the detail of standards and certification at stake, and there can be a lot of ambivalence in the relationship between attribution by the professionals and interpretation by the final user – fair trade is a case in point (Neyland and Simakova, 2009). To a certain extent, a label may function in the market even if there is a plurality of interpretations that are substantially different from the attribution information. The efficiency of the signalling effect requires at least that the label catches the attention of market actors and that the interpretation generated translates into transaction behaviours that are compatible with what the attribution information would imply.

The label as ‘qualification sign’

The notion of ‘signal’ offers a useful starting point to elaborate a semiotics of market labelling and to analyse the collective processes at stake in its production. We may call ‘signalisation work’ the collective work necessary to articulate the signal, the attribution and interpretation information. Signalisation requires advertising, communication activities, sharing knowledge about modalities of attribution of the label, about the benefits it brings to labelled products etc. This conception might however look quite restrictive for our purpose. Indeed, it doesn’t really open to an investigation of the concrete semiotic features through which the signal operates. Besides, it implicitly emphasises the conventional processes governing the construction of meaning: the signalisation work is what needs to be done in order to establish a conventional relationship between the signal and what is signalled (as understandable through attribution and interpretation information). To move forward, we propose to develop a conception of the label as ‘qualification sign’, following an analytic orientation rooted in pragmatism and sensitive to the semiotic features of market objects (Lury, 2004; Muniesa, 2007).

Considering the label as a sign is less anecdotal than it seems, especially by comparison with the economic view. Indeed, an interesting feature of the economic literature on signalling

evoked above is that it seems to cautiously avoid the notion of sign. This may appear counterintuitive as one of the usages of the term ‘sign’ precisely relates to signalling: the sign as a placard in road signalling. But the economists’ reluctance to use this term is more understandable when one considers the other usage of the notion of ‘sign’, coming from semiotics and pragmatism (Barthes, 1964; Pierce, 1931). This usage enters less easily in the conceptual categories of information theory and it evokes a capacity to signify that is a more open and ambivalent operation than signalling properly speaking. It conceives of meaning as an action and not as a state of affairs (Pierce, 1931), considers the situated character of this action beyond the mere fluidity of information and opens to a reflection on its instantiation in material devices (Denis and Pontille, 2015).

Following the STS approach of the economy, we will examine how such a sign as the label can be involved in commodity qualification. We thus apprehend the label as a market device, in the sense of a ‘material and discursive assemblage’ intervening in the construction of markets (Callon et al, 2007). From this point of view, it can be compared with a variety of settings and instruments mobilized in market scenes to apprehend economic goods and singularize them (Callon et al, 2002): technical or legal classifications, measuring instruments, ranking procedures, comparative tables, etc. As an assemblage mobilised in good qualification operations, the label sign has distinctive features. It usually associates a nominal (the name) and a graphic part (the logo). The name makes it possible to mobilise the label as a category in language operations, and thus as a qualification device in the discursive ordering of the market. The logo (that may appear in different forms depending on the situation) opens the label to visual communication, supporting such operations as catching attention, distinguishing between economic goods, ordering them in space, etc. It enacts qualification in the frame of the transaction as an act of choosing that requires product identification, manipulation and comparison.

Seen from this angle, labels share a lot of characteristics with brands, as they are analysed by Lury (2004, 62-81). Our objective in this chapter will be precisely to elucidate the different dimensions involved in the capacity to signify of a qualification tool whose multifaceted agency recalls that of similar market devices such as, for instance, ‘brands’. For this, we propose to start with the notion of signal, and to consider additional modalities of signifying. A first additional modality that we would like to consider here is what we call the ‘message’. As a message, the label sign produces autonomous meaning rooted in the semantics of the systems that it comprises: letters, words, images, logos, etc. Through labelling, economic goods acquire an agency to convey messages at the heart of market scenes. A second modality of signifying that we will consider is what we call the ‘emblem’. As an emblem, the sign points to the organizations, institutions, actors, justifications, rules or values underlying the guaranties secured by the label.

In what follows, we use the notions of the signal, the emblem and the message as analytic vehicles to examine the capacity of RGE to signify along some episodes of its history. We mobilize empirical material drawn from two different sources (Mallard et al, 2018): interviews made with professional actors in the construction sector involved at one level or another in labelling activities, and press articles commenting on the emergence and development of RGE. We systematically collected and analysed articles published on RGE in the generalist and in the professional press – notably in ‘lemoniteur.fr’ and ‘batiactu.com’, two media that are influential

in the French construction sector. This material enables us to reconstitute a history of the ‘RGE policy’ and to concentrate on some events in the period 2011-2014 that are particularly significant for our question. In this investigation, press material is more than an instrumental means providing access to data concerning RGE. The approach also corresponds to the idea that the dynamics of signifying of a label operates not only in the course of market transactions (where actors discover the sign of the label and attribute or recognize particular meanings to it while they buy and sell) but also in various arenas of public debate. Our hypothesis is that the professional press in some way reflects the activity in these arenas. Thus, we use press material as a ‘proxy’ to apprehend the activity of the hybrid forums where the implication of the label as a qualification sign creates controversy and provokes negotiations among various actors (Callon et al, 2002).

The eventful history of a qualification sign

The RGE label was imagined in 2011 as one of the last public policy actions developed in the frame of the ‘*Grenelle de l’Environnement*’, the vast program striving to embrace comprehensively the challenges of sustainable development that was propelled in 2007 by the then French president Nicolas Sarkozy.³ The construction sector was clearly identified in this program as an area for political action. Notably, the improvement of the energy performance of buildings undergoing renovation was perceived as a major challenge for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions.

The public authorities’ desire to intervene in the home retrofit market was motivated by the idea that the quality of work performed by enterprises in that domain was key, and that the modalities of economic organization of service provision suffered from three problems. First, the market needed to be stimulated by relevant incentives, as homeowners would usually not undertake costly restoration works only on the sole basis of environmental consciousness. Second, the home retrofit market was dominated by small businesses and the adjustments between supply and demand operated through informal practices and network processes. This resulted in quite opaque functioning and in very variable levels of quality in service provision. Finally, this market had seen in the past years the rise of numerous initiatives of labelling and certification, so that one of the problems was now the proliferation of quality signs, a proliferation that would introduce a lot of confusion in the guidance of consumers towards good service providers.⁴

Facing this situation, the public authorities elaborated an approach based on a labelling policy that would target two purposes at the same time. On the one hand, the policy would enable one to distinguish businesses that had pursued specific training ensuring a minimum of skills with respect to energy efficient renovation work. On the other hand it would reward homeowners conforming to the policy through fiscal benefits such as tax exemption or interest free loans to fund their renovation. Thus the labelling policy would operate simultaneously on the demand and on the supply side: homeowners would be incentivized to undertake renovation works and businesses had to improve the quality of their services in order to get access to the

³ This program gave rise to a significant academic literature commenting on successes and failures and trying to evaluate its effects (Boy et al, 2012).

⁴ See Faisant et Dieulesaint, 2011

market. However, the public authorities were reluctant to introduce a new label for small businesses that could potentially increase the confused situations already experienced in the market. They decided that the new label would apply not to the businesses themselves, but to the already existing labels: a given label would gain the RGE recognition if its provider could prove that the conditions of delivery included high level skill training in the matter of energy efficiency and serious control in the application. Instead of adding a new quality sign in a domain where there was already a plethora, the aim was thus to build a network of equivalences between existing labels that would be visible for the consumers. Additionally, this policy would probably invite certifying bodies and label providers to conform to a minimum of performance in the matter of energy efficiency and, as a consequence, end up in some sort of re-ordering the market of labelling itself.

RGE as a messaging assemblage

The promoters of this public policy decided to name the label ‘*Reconnu Grenelle Environnement*’. The label would exist in public space through its extensive or through its abbreviated designation – ‘RGE’. The logos simply duplicated the nominal formulation, adding very few further visual elements. In figure 1, we see the two graphic expressions of the label as they were used in promotional documents, in the press, and in the effective affixing of the sign on labelled entities.



Figure 1: The extensive and abbreviated logos of the label
Source ADEME

As we see with RGE, a label generally articulates a plurality of equivalent formulations – between the name and the logo, or between different names like the extensive and abbreviated designation – mobilised in different communicative processes. Let us examine the messaging operations at play here. How can we describe the message conveyed by the label? As a matter of fact, one should say the messages, since the answer depends on the particular instantiation of the sign. The extensive and verbal designation of the label articulates two semantic units. ‘*Reconnu*’ suggests that there is an objective of recognition in the attribution of the label; ‘*Grenelle Environnement*’, a syntagm that a French native speaker immediately reads as ‘*Grenelle de l’Environnement*’ indicates the institution that is at play in this process of recognition. Thus, the label conveys the message ‘this good has been recognized by the *Grenelle de l’Environnement*’. Note that the visual instantiation of the label adds one more component to the message, that of the ‘greenness’, using the fact that the green colour is conventionally associated with environment, ecology, sustainability etc. ‘This good has been recognized by the *Grenelle de l’Environnement* and this involves an ecological dimension’ is a possible formulation of the message of the visual extensive logo.

If we consider the instantiation of the label as the ‘RGE’ sign, the question of the message is a bit more ambiguous. Indeed, it appears at first sight as an acronym, e.g. as a sign that can be substituted with an expression that, in turn, conveys its own message. But what do the three initials stand for? At the beginning of the history of the label, there is no clear answer to this question and it is through the repetitive association of the extensive and the abbreviated designations that an equivalence between both emerges. In the early press articles of our corpus, for instance those presenting the genesis of this new label, both expressions are always used in order for the reader to decipher the meaning of the acronym. In a later stage, the extensive designation gradually disappears, suggesting that the RGE designation becomes autonomously associated with the message ‘Reconnu *Grenelle de l’Environnement*’ – or that ‘RGE’ becomes a ‘semantic black-box’ with a ‘stand-alone’ message.

An important dimension of the messaging process is the concrete modalities through which the message is expressed in market scenes. How is the sign affixed to the labelled entity? The promoters of the RGE policy had to invent an original modality of ‘visual messaging’ adapted to the idea of ‘labelling a label’. They devised a graphic language where the logo of ‘RGE’ was affixed on the logo of the label, conventionally tilted at the top and on the left. Figure 2 illustrates this method, on the case a well-known label in the construction sector, the ‘ECO-artisan’ label. Here, we see concretely an expression of the ‘cascade’ of labelling that was at stake in the RGE policy. We also get an intuition of a reason why the acronym version of the label was so important: the idea of labelling a label could be readable only if the logo was compact enough.



Figure 2: The ‘RGE-labelled’ ECO-Artisan label

Source CAPEB

This presentation illustrates what we mean with the notion of the label sign as a message. ‘The label is the message’, so to say: the sign is an assemblage that produces particular meanings in itself, in the absence of any signalling infrastructure. Yet RGE’s mission was also to operate as a signal in the market. How can we apprehend this capacity?

Fall 2011: Signing the RGE agreement to lay the basis for signalisation

A primary document to constitute RGE as a signal is the ‘RGE charter’, an agreement undersigned in November 2011 by 7 stakeholders.⁵ Signatories included, firstly, what we can call ‘State actors’: the State Secretary (*Secrétaire d’Etat*) in charge of Housing and the president of ADEME, the French public agency in charge of environment and energy. Other signatories were the representatives of QUALIBAT, QUALIT’Enr and QUALIFELEC, three organizations specialised in skill certification in the construction sector. Lastly, the two large professional federations representing a variety of trades in the construction sector were also part of the agreement’s signatories: the CAPEB⁶, more oriented towards small businesses and the FFB⁷, traditionally considered as representative of larger companies and groups.

In the agreement, each protagonist made specific commitments. ADEME committed to undertake a program promoting RGE and defining the links with relevant existing labels. This meant identifying the labels that would be eligible to a ‘RGE-recognition’, and defining the associated modalities: new training contents concerning energy efficiency had to be added to the courses, and modalities of attribution of the label had sometimes to be reinforced. ‘RGE-recognition’ concretely gave to the certification organizations the right to display the RGE sign in their own label sign, in the way we presented above. The State Secretary in charge of Housing had to take on the fiscal part of the RGE policy: he committed to define and implement the concrete regulation that would grant tax exemption and free interest loans to homeowners hiring a ‘RGE business’, that is to say a business that had obtained a label that was itself ‘RGE-labelled’. The system was to come into effect in January 2014, almost two years after the ratification of the agreement. As the Secretary of Housing himself explained, this period of time would enable professional actors in the sector to raise their skills with respect to energy efficiency and to prepare for the new market configuration, where the possession of a RGE-labelled label would provide a competitive advantage.

Skill certification organizations and professional federations were involved in the agreement because they were in charge of labels concerned by RGE. The skill certification organizations (QUALIBAT, QUALIT’Enr and QUALIFELEC) had in their service offering training for specific professions where skills in matter of energy efficiency was explicitly or implicitly required: heating installer, roofer, solar panel installers, etc. The CAPEB and the FFB were not specialised in vocational training but both had in the recent past developed a label promoting the improvement of skills in matter of energy efficiency for the sustainable development. For instance, the CAPEB had launched some years ago the label ‘*ECO-Artisan*’ evoked above. In the RGE agreement, all these label providers committed to raise the level of skills in matter of energy efficiency required in their training programs.

As a whole, we can see through the agreement a series of elements of signalisation that RGE was to establish. Interestingly, the signalisation was to operate at two levels: it was targeted at qualification providers delivering labels, but also as small businesses. Two interrelated

⁵ ‘Charte d’engagement relative à la « Reconnaissance Grenelle Environnement » des signes de qualité délivrés aux entreprises réalisant des travaux concourant à améliorer la performance énergétique des bâtiments’, 9 November 2011.

⁶ Confédération de l’Artisanat et des Petites Entreprises du Bâtiment.

⁷ Fédération Française du Bâtiment.

markets were at stake: the market for qualification services on the one hand, and the market for home retrofit on the other. And two different signals were to be perceived: on the one hand a quality signal in both markets ('labels obtaining the RGE labels promote high skills', 'small businesses with a 'RGE-labelled' label offer good services'); on the other hand a fiscal incentive signal on the home retrofit market ('small businesses with a 'RGE-labelled' label offer fiscal benefits').

The spirit of the 'Grenelle': RGE as an emblem of a specific politics of the market

Beyond the signal, RGE also appeared as the emblem of a particular type of political intervention in the market. In order to grasp the importance of this emblemizing effect, it is necessary to come back to one of the components of the message conveyed by RGE: the notion of the '*Grenelle*'. In the French political culture, this denomination refers to a mode of governance that largely associates the public authorities with its Social Partners: the '*Accords de Grenelle*' was a historic agreement undersigned by the government, the trade unions and employers representatives in 1968, in the midst of the May movement, leading notably to a 35% increase of the minimum salary and to the creation of new, open conditions of social negotiations in companies. Since then, the reference to the '*Grenelle*' is used in the political and journalistic parlance to point to any big reform where the State and Social Partners contribute to redefine the regulation of a sector or domain. The '*Grenelle de l'Environnement*' launched by the Nicolas Sarkozy government was a sign of the great ambition of his five-year term in matter of sustainability issues.

The choice of the name of the label can thus be seen as a desire to infuse the spirit of the '*Grenelle de l'environnement*' – and of the '*Grenelle*' *tout court* – in the RGE policy. Using the term proposed by Lury (2004) in her analysis of brands, we may say that the label sign here pointed in an indexical way to the institution that shaped its logics.⁸ This indexical reference implied, in undertone 1. that the introduction of the label aimed at a structural reform and not just an anecdotal change in the market organization 2. that it involved the presence of the State and 3. that it would be implemented not as an autonomous, authoritarian intervention in the market, but as a cooperative action involving professional actors and to a certain extent negotiating with them. From this point of view, skill certification organisations and professional federations were involved in the agreement because they were stakeholders of the labelling business, but also more generally, because they were deemed influential in the construction sector. These large and powerful actors would lend their political support to RGE in order to encourage the small businesses to follow the paths of this allegedly innovative public policy.

⁸ Drawing on the semiotic of Peirce (1978), Lury (2004) distinguishes between three different processes of establishing a reference between the logo – or the name – and the reality of the brand it represents : as a symbol, the logo or the name becomes conventionally associated with the brand as an effect of repetition in communication ('Kodak' ends up been associated with 'photography') ; as an icon, the logo or the name develops a relationship of similarity with the brand (an example is the use of the green colour to refer to nature for environment-friendly brands); and as an index, it points to an aspect of the process of production (the brand 'Giorgio Armani' points to the actor who is at the origin of the product). This distinction is very helpful for us as the emblematic functions of label signs seem to operate as brands.

It is interesting to note that the logo of RGE does not use the codes that traditionally characterize logos and other elements of visual identity of the French administration: neither the figure of *Mariane*, the emblem of the French republic (Aguilhon, 1979), nor the blue-white-red colours appear, explicitly or as a connotation, in the RGE graphic image. Alauzen (2019) has studied the genesis of a logo for a French administration in charge of developing relations with citizen on the Internet. Her work shows the importance of these visual stereotypes for the incarnation of State as an actant in various political and economic contexts. Although we do not know the detail of the genesis of the name and the logo of RGE, we may assume that the intent here was less to signify the presence of the State in the market, than the presence of the specific State-led coalition we have described.



Figure 3: the ratification of the RGE agreement

Source: Antoine Hudin

The launching of RGE gave rise to a media event that also appears characteristic of the specific policy that it was to emblemize. It took place at BATIMAT, the major annual trade fair in the French construction sector, and staged a public ceremony of the signing of the agreement. Figure 3 shows a particular moment of this event. We see here the participants signing the

agreement (the Secretary in charge of Housing, the president of the FFB, the head of QUALIBAT, etc.), conforming thus to the usual political symbolism of the cooperation between the State and market stakeholders. Behind the image, a panel of journalists immortalize the scene. The text of the agreement on the tables, the political and market actors rejoicing, the journalist capturing traces of this alliance between politics and the market and preparing to give a large echo to the new label - all the components of this ceremonial feature the articulation of the signal and the emblem that were at stake in the launching of RGE.

2011-2013: The slow rise of RGE in the market

The ratification of the RGE agreement was of course only the beginning of the story. The event was important, and many actors in the sector would expect a great success for a label that was backed by such influential actors. Yet this is not exactly what happened. How can we appreciate the way the label spread in the construction sector? A first indication of its dissemination – and to some extent, of its success – is the increasing visibility gained by the sign in various contexts in the months and years following the launch at BATIMAT 2011. Several qualification providers of this sector started to conform to the RGE policy, acquired the label and made this recognition visible. In the professional press in this period, we see a flourishing of new pictograms with ‘RGE’ stuck to an already established quality sign, as in the examples reproduced in figure 4. To grasp the importance of this publicization of the RGE label adoption, one has to recall the particular timetable that was at stake. Indeed, the period between the launch of RGE (November 2011) and the implementation of the fiscal benefits (January 2014) was devoted to ‘preparing the market’. During this period, no financial benefit was to be expected from holding the label. Yet the skill certification organizations thought that homeowners would change their behaviours once the tax exemption and free interest loans would enter into force, and they wanted to be on the right side of the market – on the side of the quality signs dubbed by RGE.



Figure 4: Affixing RGE on various quality labels

Source: QUALIBAT and FFB

Let us turn to another indication of the spread of RGE: the number of small businesses obtaining a RGE-labelled label. This indicator gives a much less optimistic picture than the former. As late as in June 2013, that is to say one and a half years after the label launch, at a

moment when many qualification labels had acquired RGE recognition, one could count only 7500 RGE-labelled small businesses. This was at least 4 times less than the most pessimistic expectations of the public authorities. Small businesses did not seem to be interested in acquiring new skills and anticipating the market change, for diverse reasons. One among those reasons seemed to be the disputable quality of the additional training courses on energy performance that were imposed to obtain a RGE-labelled qualification (Frances and Tricoire, 2016). In Spring 2013, scepticism about the relevance of the RGE policy started to grow seriously among professionals and public actors.

We can turn to still another indication of the dissemination of the label. Let us examine how RGE appeared in the professional press. Figure 5 plots the number of articles where ‘RGE’ is mentioned between 2011 and 2015 in the online publication ‘batiactu.com’, an influential media outlet in the French construction sector.⁹ This graph may be taken as a proxy of the intensity of the debates in the hybrid forums of the market. It shows the magnitude of the public problematization activity around the label, and is thus characteristic of the collective work of appropriation, redefinition and transformation of what the sign RGE signified. As we can see, in spite of the horde of journalists who hurried at BATIMAT 2011 to photograph the ratification of the RGE agreement, there was not much to say about it during the two first years of its existence.

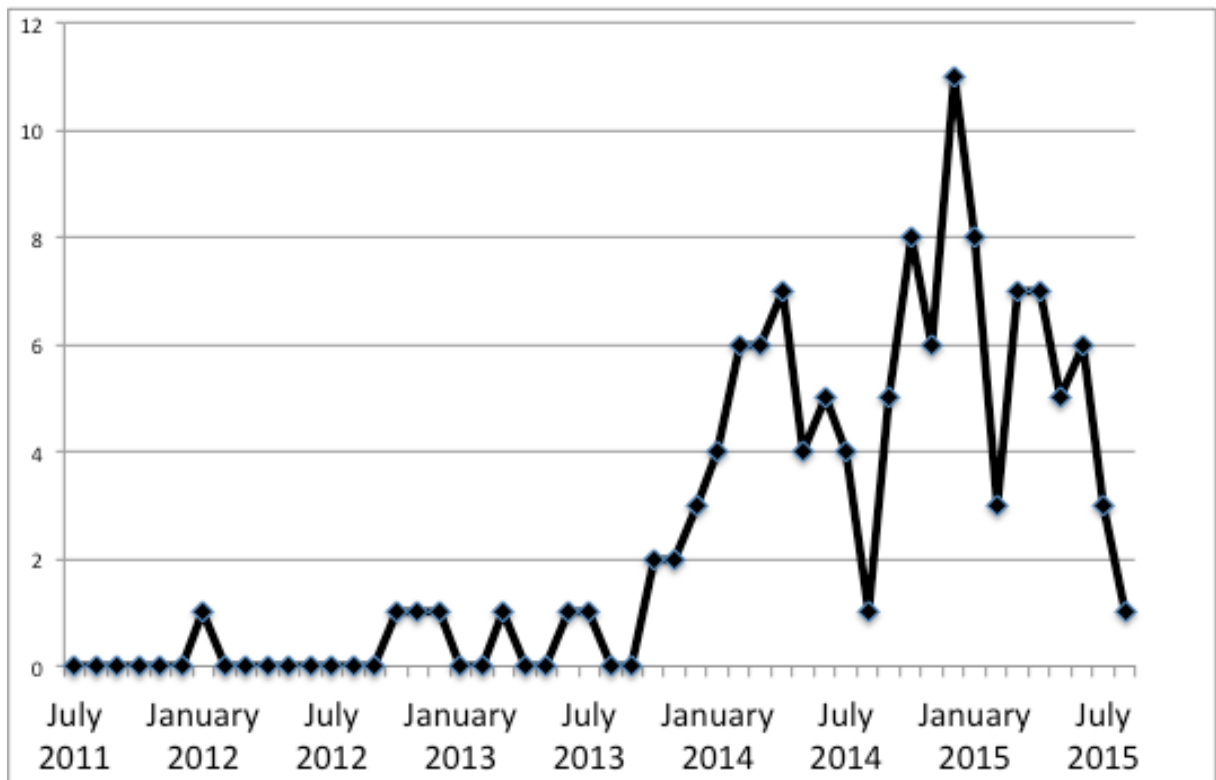


Figure 5: number of articles mentioning ‘RGE’ in batiactu.com

Source: A. Mallard

⁹ A very similar graph is obtained when plotting the number of articles containing the term ‘RGE’ in the online and paper publication of ‘Le Moniteur’, another very influential media in the sector.

An analysis of the content of the articles makes it possible to interpret different moments in the activity of problematization that started in spring 2013. Particularly, we can identify 3 important events in 2013 and 2014 that caused numerous heated discussions in the press. In the fall of 2013, the meaning of the acronym RGE changed. In May-June 2014, the consumerist journal '*UFC-Que Choisir*' dropped a bomb with the publication of the result of a survey suggesting that RGE-labelled businesses didn't really possess high level skills in matter of energy efficiency. In the fall of 2014, a group of small businesses activists started to publicly question the efficiency and legitimacy of the RGE policy and called to resist to it. In the next section, we examine what these episodes can teach to us concerning the capacity of RGE to signify in the market.

Fall 2013: Re-emblemizing the State intervention in the market

In spring 2013, rumours on a possible change of name for the RGE label started to spread in the construction sector. Two possible reasons justifying such a decision can be identified in the professional press. First, as we have seen, the adoption of RGE by small businesses had been stagnating since its launch, and a new name could be the opportunity for the label to gain momentum. Second, a new left wing political majority had come to power in May 2012 with the election of François Hollande as *Président de la République*, and the new political staff wished to take distance with the projects undertaken by Nicolas Sarkozy. The '*Grenelle de l'Environnement*' was an icon of the past *quinquennat*, and in this new light, RGE sort of appeared as an embarrassing emblem. How was it possible to remove the reference to the '*Grenelle*' without totally deleting the label? The public authorities found a tricky solution to this problem: they decided to keep the acronym and to replace the term '*Grenelle*' by another word starting with the same initial. In the professional media, this re-naming operation was an opportunity for wide speculations, ironic comments and even some confusion. On 30 October 2013, *Lemoniteur.fr* announced that the substitutive word, as it had been disclosed by the Minister for Ecology, was '*gagnant*', with a name label '*Reconnu Gagnant pour l'Environnement*' (certified winner for the environment) whose meaning was in line with the spirit of RGE. A few days later, the Minister for Housing contradicted the Minister for Ecology and announced at the BATIMAT 2013 exhibition the new name for the label: RGE would now mean '*Reconnu Garant de l'Environnement*' (certified as a guarantor for the environment).

Beyond the anecdote, this change of name is characteristic of the re-articulation of the message, the signal and the emblem underlying the label. We can imagine that since RGE had led to redefining the logos of many labels in the sector, completely changing the name as envisaged at the beginning by the actors of the new political majority was perceived as a dangerous strategy. One would run the risk of undoing the work carried out over the past two years with numerous actors and inscribed in a multiplicity of visible market devices: what would all those 'RGE-labelled' logos become if RGE was simply abandoned? The possibility of discrediting public action was great, and the hypothesis of a total change of name was probably not evoked for very long. As a whole, the change of name operated through the substitution of one of the components of the assemblage of the label, in a way that enabled some messaging equivalences (RGE was still the abbreviated name of the label), to modify the political emblem

(the *Grenelle* was replaced by a guarantor) and to keep the signalling infrastructure quite unchanged (the link between RGE, and the original agreement was kept).

From the point of view of the emblem, the term ‘*Garant*’ was in fact perfectly adapted. Indeed, it definitively removed the connotation of Nicolas Sarkozy’s projects and it evoked a position for the intervention of the State in the market that was very acceptable. Accordingly, there was no more reference to a contractual cooperative action backed by the Social Partners, but the new symbolization evoked a position of neutrality and protection that was simultaneously consensual and adapted to the present political team. The State still appeared as an umbrella in the market – a specific attitude that the RGE sign, affixed above the quality signs, had echoed since the launch of the label – prone to protect the conformity of transactions without intervening in them. It still had simultaneously authority and respect towards the market actors. But it was definitely not the same State.

Spring 2014: Criticizing RGE and mocking its message through language games

After two years of relative tranquillity, 2014 was an eventful year for RGE. Figure 5 shows that the label was the subject of many press discussions in spring. Some reported the tormented unfolding of what was, in the end, a progress for the label: the associated fiscal benefits were finally operationalized and implemented in the regulation. But a lot of other discussions originated in a controversy launched by *UFC-Que choisir*, a powerful generalist consumerist journal in France. In May, it published the results of a report showing that the RGE certification by no means implied the expected skills improvement.¹⁰ The report was based on a blind testing inquiry conducted with 29 qualified small businesses, who were asked to perform an energy assessment for homes to be renovated (they ignored that the client was the consumerist journal). The report concluded notably that the diagnosis performed and the quotes provided were ill adapted. The journal inferred that the training provided to obtain the RGE-labelled qualifications was of low quality. At the general level, the verdict was even that the policy undertaken to raise the quality of retrofit services and reach better energy efficiency in renovated buildings had to be totally redesigned.

This press report gave rise to a controversy among professional actors. The catch phrase through which the *UFC-Que choisir* journalists summarized the result of their investigation is interesting for us: They claimed that ‘RGE’ would just signify ‘*Rien ne Garantit l’Efficacité*’ (nothing guarantees efficiency). Through this controversy, the *UFC-Que Choisir* inaugurated a modality of appropriation of the label sign based on its semiotic structure and subverting its message through language games so as to make it an object of mockery and derision. The consumerist journal would reiterate the pun two years later: another article published in 2016 diagnosing analogous troubles concluded that the RGE policy clearly constituted a ‘*Risque Général d’Enfumage*’ (general risk of bamboozling). But as we will see, this method was also used by other actors engaged in a fight against the label.

¹⁰ UFC – Que Choisir, 2014.

Fall 2014: Raising political opposition against RGE and trying to dis-articulate the message and the signal

The controversy raised by the UFC-Que Choisir progressively lost its virulence during the summer, but a new opposition to the label started again in October. It happened in a moment when the legal configuration linking the label and the fiscal benefits was fixed: homeowners could soon start to obtain tax exemption and free interest loans when employing a RGE-labelled business for a home renovation. This was hence the moment where the effects of the label in the renovation sector would really start to be manifest on the supply side.

The protest movement started in the western part of France, with the constitution of a collective of small businesses struggling to draw the attention of political and economic actors around the risks for construction professionals that the RGE policy would cause. As a matter of fact, these actors didn't protest against the legitimacy of the sustainability issues at stake or against the objective of improving energy efficiency in the building sector. It was exactly the contrary: they claimed that many small businesses in this sector were perfectly aware of these stakes and that they had already developed innovative practices and methods in that matter. This was typically the case for the '*Réseau Eco-bâtir*' (Eco-building network) and the '*Association Approche Eco-habitat*', the two groups that had launched the protest movement. Professionals in these groups had taken up for a long time the objective of improving energy efficiency by themselves, and had not been waiting for the State's action in that matter. Against this background, they claimed that the RGE policy was about to provoke a disaster. The training provided to obtain RGE-labelled labels was too general and of a low quality; the procedures necessary to obtain these qualifications were complex and much too bureaucratic; as a whole, the upcoming entry into force of tax benefits associated with RGE would trigger the exclusion from the market of a whole bunch of skilled small businesses that were already weakened by a difficult macroeconomic climate. In the end, larger companies, that could afford to adapt to the requirements and probably capture the market share left by small businesses were to be the main beneficiaries of the RGE policy.

The opponents chose a name that well characterized the nature of their protestation: '*RGE ... pas comme ça!*' ('RGE ... not this way!') The collective was created by *Eco-Bâtir* and *Approche Eco-habitat* in May 2014, grew during the summer through the recruitment of new members and through communication actions¹¹ and progressively gained a large visibility so that in October, it received full attention in the professional press. An interesting feature of this protest movement for the present reflection concerns the way it started to parody the label sign in order to attract attention and to grow mobilisation in the public sphere. In their communication on the Internet, the opponents mocked the label with a diverted RGE acronym: '*Reconnu Grenouille de l'Environnement*' (certified frog of the environment). The possibility to compose a new message with the three letters of the acronym was once again a resource in the communication processes associated with the label.

¹¹ They notably initiated an action on a petition website, where small businesses were invited to post their discontent against the RGE policy. It obtained a large success, with hundreds of protest testimonies.

See https://www.cyberacteurs.org/archives/bilan.php?id_petition=797, accessed on 28 June 2019.

One could find in the communication documents of the opponents a justification to the frog allegory: it was based on ‘an observation concerning the behaviour of a frog placed in a pot full with water progressively heating, to illustrate the habituation phenomenon leading to an absence of reaction in front of a serious situation’.¹² The message was clear: with the RGE policy, the home retrofit market was like a pot of heating water with small entrepreneurs inside naively ignoring that their destiny was to be scalded – and probably eaten by large companies with the blessing of the State.

Another interesting feature of the collective’s communication action was its graphic embodiment. They devised a logo parodying the original label sign, where the name ‘*Garant*’ was replaced by ‘*Grenouille*’, and where a question mark appeared in the end, with a small frog hanging on the planet figuring the dot.¹³ The image of the frog, represented in various posture (feverishly, conducting inquiry with a magnifying glass, in the position of making a testimony, etc) was used in other communication documents distributed by the collective, symbolising the fragility of the small entrepreneurs joggled by the RGE policy (Figure 6).



Figure 6: the frog used in communication documents of the collective ‘*RGE... pas comme ça!*’

Source: Shutterstock

In addition to its active communication in the media, the ‘*RGE ... pas comme ça!*’ collective launched a legal attack against the RGE policy. In December 2014, it lodged an appeal in the ‘*Conseil d’Etat*’ (the highest court for the litigation against the administration in France) against the law that had implemented the tax benefits associated with the RGE policy. One of the claims in this appeal is very interesting for the present reflection: the collective underlined that the continuity of the RGE label was broken between the period where it meant ‘*Reconnu*

¹² This explanation was posted on the website of one of the heads of the movement. See <http://www.lesconstructionsecologiques.fr/rge-pour-les-nuls/>, accessed on 28 June 2019. The author provided other possible explanations of the reference to the ‘*grenouille*’ choice, for instance the fact that the verb ‘*grenouiller*’ in French means machinating to obtain advantageous results in the political and business spheres, or the idea that the term ‘*grenouillage*’ referred to a feudal law requiring from the vassals to silence frogs croaking at night so that the suzerain could sleep quietly.

¹³ This logo can be found at the following address : <http://site.reseau-ecobatis.org/2014/06/rge-reconnu-grenouille-de-lenvironnement/>, accessed on 28 June 2019.

Grenelle de l'Environnement' and *'Reconnu Garant de l'Environnement'*. This resulted in two different populations of RGE-labelled small businesses, generating a juridical inconsistency that would prohibit the enforcement of the provisions of the law. Although it looks like nit-picking, the argument deserves examination in our reflection, because it was a way to challenge the continuity of the legal foundations of the signalling work performed around the label. Although the acronym was the same, the name of the label was different and one could legitimately doubt whether the legal provision established for the first name would be applicable to the second. Unfortunately, the *'Conseil d'Etat'* didn't provide us the opportunity to examine in detail this argument. It rejected the appeal, not on the basis of the argument per se, but based on the fact that the issue was not one of emergency, and that another jurisdiction should have been chosen to file the complaint.

Discussion: the signal, the emblem and the message in the label sign

In this section, we would like to briefly propose some elements of discussion of the issues opened by the RGE case.

Signifying the face of the State in the market: the role of political emblems

As indicated at the beginning of the chapter, the analysis proposed here goes beyond the case of labels involved in public policies: the need to articulate the signalling, emblematising and messaging functions of labels to ensure their effectiveness seems very general to us. Nevertheless, the case of RGE makes it possible to consider the semiotic stakes involved in the labelling policies promoted by the public authorities.

The traditional analysis of public policy labels tends to focus attention on signalisation issues, even when it perceives the role of political emblems. For example, in their analysis of governance by labels, Bergeron et al (2014) examine the conditions of emergence of signals that can trigger competitive and imitative mechanisms, while recognizing the strength of 'patronizing by the State' as a source of legitimacy. The present approach invites further investigation of this kind of mechanisms.

We have seen the importance of the media event through which RGE was launched, a media event that comprised much ceremony. Such a media event surely contributes to the signalling of the label, to the extent that it inaugurates a widespread circulation of information about the label and the way it should be attributed and interpreted. But it also contributes to the construction of the political emblem that the public authorities had in mind when they designed the RGE policy. To grasp the importance of the emblematising process at play in such an event, let us recall Durkheim's intuition concerning the role of emblems and symbols in the constitution of social groups, and the importance of religious ceremony to activate its strength and coherence (Durkheim, 1913). We could thus transpose the Durkheimian model of the efficiency of the totem in society to consider the intervention of the State in the market. According to Durkheim, the strength of religion in society relies on the articulation between two mechanisms: on the one hand, the occasional religious ceremony institutes the cohesion of the religious group around the totem through practices of violence and collective effervescence, and on the other hand, the omnipresence of the totem in daily ordinary situations make this cohesion durable. One could say, following a similar scheme, that an important ceremony was necessary to introduce the

presence of the State in the market, and that the occurrence of the ‘*Grenelle*’ in the label’s name was a way to make this presence visible on a permanent basis. Another interesting aspect of the political dimension of the process of emblemization relates to the change of modality of presence of the State in the course of RGE’s history: we go from the contractual and cooperative State of a *Grenelle*-like agreement at the launch of RGE to a more neutral and protective State with the substitution of the word ‘*garant*’ in the name.

This case also invites us to reflect, symmetrically, on the particular place that labels can occupy in all the signs mobilized by the State to indicate its presence in government activities. The history of the interactions between law and politics shows that the State is a major producer of signs (Legendre, 1988). Among the multifaceted aspects of this topic, an important question concerns the possibility to make the ‘face’ of the State visible in one way or another. In her study on the logos of state communication on the Internet, Alauzen (2019) shows the interest of the notion of ‘faciality’, derived from the thinking of Deleuze and Guattari (1999)¹⁴, to grasp the processes by which it is possible to embody the State and give it a figure or a face. As a label involved in public policy, RGE exemplifies a modality of ‘faciality’ of the State in the market. Further investigations on this topic may explore the particular features of this faciality (starting for instance here, with its ambivalence and plurality, depending on the meaning of the acronym), the way in which it may interact with other modalities of State embodiment, its capacity to articulate economic and political meanings, etc.

Encoding and decoding the label’s message

A salient point of the analysis we propose here, and of the RGE story, concerns the dynamics of messaging that the label sign entails. We have seen this dynamics in the language games in which the label has been involved, and in the parodies performed by opponents to the policy (the *UFC-Que Choisir* and ‘*RGE... pas comme ça*’). The way the different components of the message are assembled in a label sign is important because it anchors the potential of signifying that can be mobilised in various situations and by different actors. What is at stake here is the whole encoding/decoding logic described by Stuart Hall (1980), where messages designed by their sender (here the public authorities) can be re-appropriated, reused and diverted based on their own semiotic structure. Consider the example of the frog, appearing with ‘*RGE... pas comme ça*’ as an ironic and satirical character. The choice of these opponents was probably guided by a strong sense of communication. Animal references are commonly used to evoke how people get screwed by market or political actors (one can think, in French, at the pigeons or at the sheep), but the popular tale of the frog in the pot of boiling water seemed particularly adapted to vividly illustrate the future position of small businesses in a market re-organized by the RGE policy. It remains that the assonance between the ‘GREN’ of *grenouille* and the GREN of ‘*Grenelle*’ was paramount to make the catchword and the parody fully operate.

Another interesting feature in this case study concerns the space opened for language games by acronyms, that are quite common in labelling. Acronyms partake in an economy of signalling (they simplify the memorizing and usage of signalling information) but as the RGE story shows, they can be involved in discursive language games diverting the message. The fact

¹⁴ Note that Lury (2004) also mobilizes the notion of faciality to characterize the way in which logos incarnate the face of brands in the market.

that the label was used as an acronym gave rise to various possibilities of decoding and modifying the message, be they politically laden (from *Grenelle* to *Garant*) or diverting (from *Grenelle* to *Grenouille*). Research work in socio-linguistics or semiotics analysing the language games at stake with acronyms (Bacot et al, 2011) could probably be very inspiring as a starting point to explore further these configurations, provided one takes into account the specific feature of market situations – literature in that matter more often questions the political than the economic usages.

The thematic of the parody, that is very present in the RGE story, also deserves further investigation. When mobilised in conflict or competition situations, parody is an exciting rhetorical device. It is useful to draw attention and to express opposition without aggression. Notice that the function of parody in economic situations has been much more problematized than the function of acronyms, notably because it is a very rich resource for discourses of publicity (Cochoy, 1999; Bonhomme, 2012). RGE shows a case where the logic of parody, anchored in language games, is mobilised to articulate a form of political resistance to a market order that is itself shaped by situated political strategies. It remains important to note, finally, that the messaging agency of a label is, as is the case for signalling and emblemizing, never totally predictable and determined by its components. Who could have predicted that RGE would be translated in a parodic way into '*Rien ne Garantit l'Efficacité*' or '*Risque Général d'Enfumage*'?

The dynamic and intertwining processes in the construction of the label sign

As our description clearly shows, the agencies of messaging, emblemizing and signalling are not separated. To a large extent, they draw on each other. For instance using established emblems and self-explanatory messages is a way to facilitate the signalling process – what economists describe in the language of decreasing costs for the establishment of the market signal (Valcescini et Mazé, 2000). Conversely, successful signalling can lead to the establishment of new emblems. For instance, the green and the red, that have typically emerged as conventions in the context of a traffic signalling based on the colours of a light, can be used as symbols. Red and green lights may today be mobilized in a variety of domains to indicate the possibility or the prohibition to act.

To conclude, let us recall that the successful production of new meanings for a label is the object of processes that have specific facets for each modality of signifying. As already explained, an efficient signal is the outcome of a signalling labour that implies advertising, communicating, creating common knowledge etc. Similarly, the establishment of emblems requires a labour of deciphering and exploring shared meanings, of mobilising and initiating the forms that can constitute collective references, which in turn implies to find the relevant symbols or icons, to find the appropriated ceremonies to initiate them etc. And the design of a label sign as message involves the exploration of possible language games between its multiple components, and their staging so as to constitute an audience in the political or market sphere. These dynamic processes, and their intertwining, constitute topics of high interest for further investigations.

Epilogue

The case of RGE is obviously very particular, and this chapter by no way argues that its trajectory is a general one – as we have explained, we used this case precisely because its idiosyncrasy would enable an interesting exploration of very general processes involved in the construction of the meaning of labels. We could not tell the whole history of the label here and we had to stop in 2014. Let us just say that RGE experienced many vagaries in the following years, with some successes and a lot of on-going controversies. In March 2018, the *Conseil de l'Environnement et du Développement Durable* issued a report, concluding that the device should be maintained but that it needed many adaptations. Maybe it was also the RGE policy itself and not the only buildings that, after all, had to be renovated.

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