



# “BEST BEFORE, OFTEN GOOD AFTER”

## *Re-Scripting the Date Label of Food in Norway*

by Tanja Plasil

*In 2018, several Norwegian food producers added a new phrase to date labels of packaged foods: best before (date), often good after. Why and how did they do this? By using two concepts from Actor-Network Theory, translation and script, this article reveals how a seemingly simple addition to a label can reveal underlying issues and policies. This case study sheds light both on how the script of the date label was used to translate UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 about food waste reduction into everyday use and practice and how the date label moved from the domain of food policy making towards the realm of environmental politics.*

**Keywords:** Date label, UN Sustainable Development Goals, Translation, Food Policy, Script

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**Acknowledgement:** The quantitative research in this article was done in cooperation with Valérie Lengard Almlí, senior researcher at NOFIMA (Research institute for applied research within the fields of fisheries, aquaculture and food). I also want to thank the editor of Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies and the peer reviewers for their efforts and their helpful comments and insights. Furthermore, I want to thank Lorenzo Cañas Bottos for his useful comments and insights.

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## Introduction

In January 2018, the largest Norwegian dairy company, TINE AS, held a social media poll on their Facebook page asking followers to choose wording options for a supplementary phrase that would be added to the original expiration date label of food, *best before*. They asked their followers: *What do you vote for? The phrase you like best will be used on our products to remind us all to waste less food*. Their post was viewed 212.000 times, shared 70 times and commented on 675 times. A week later TINE announced that option three: *men ikke dårlig etter* (English: “but not bad after”) was chosen above the two other options: *se – lukt – smak* (look, smell, taste) and *og ofte god etter* (and often good after). However, after having been in use for only a few months TINE AS changed the wording again to *best før [date] ofte god etter* (best before [date] often good after”). The poll may seem trivial, but it speaks to an underlying problem, namely food waste, an issue seen as increasingly problematic not only in Norway but global. Goal No 12 of the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Agenda states:

“Each year, an estimated 1/3 of all food produced – equivalent to 1.3 billion tons worth around \$1 trillion – ends up rotting in the bins of consumers and retailers, or spoiling due to poor transportation and harvesting practices.”<sup>1</sup>

Besides the moral dilemma and financial costs, food waste also produces unnecessary energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. According to the UN Sustainable Development Goals food productions stands for 30% of the world’s energy consumption and 22% of greenhouse gas emissions. While in the Global South most food waste happens during harvest and transport, in the Global North consumers are largely responsible for food waste. Recent research in Norway shows that 58% of food is wasted at the household level (Elstad Stensgård et al., 2018). Consumer food waste is a problem that needs to be addressed. In Norway one approach has been to focus on the wording of the date label of non-highly perishable goods: *best before (date)*. In 2017, several Norwegian food producers started labelling their products with a voluntary, supplementary sentence:<sup>2</sup> *best before (date) often good after*.

In this article, I show how global objectives like the UN Sustainable Development Goals are being translated into everyday practice through the construction and re-construction of everyday tools and technologies. More precisely, the focus point of this article is not a political figure, grand scheme or social movement but a seemingly simple, mundane, everyday technology: a date label. It is treated not as a “mere prop for social action” (Prout, 1996, p. 199) but as an actor actively shaping and being shaped by social processes and practices. Following the date label through time shows “how ordinary objects and technologies are made to speak for politics” (Woolgar & Neyland 2013, p. 3).

Adding words to the expiration date, even though seemingly trivial, is emblematic for wider changes that happened in society since the implementation of the original date label in the 1970s. As I will show below, originally, standardizing the natural and unpredictable lifetime of food into a pre-set, calculable and effective shelf-life time helped to secure food safety and quality and guaranteed a smooth working of the market. However, unforeseeable for the makers of the original date label, it changed how consumers perceived and used food products. Following what they thought is the prescription of the shelf-life time rather than their own senses, consumers often discard food prematurely. This issue recently has received ample attention in the media (e.g. “Norwegian consumers have date fear” in Adressa, April 2018<sup>3</sup>), in reports (e.g. Stensgård et al., 2018) and in international academic publishing (e.g. Evans, 2012; Watson & Meah, 2013; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015; Bilchfeldt et al., 2015; Yngfalk, 2016; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2018; Mattila et al., 2018; Närvänen et al., 2020). Today the date label is one of the most important means to determine the quality of food (Plasil, 2020) while at the same time causing unsustainable (household) food waste. I argue that the date label has changed from being exclusively a means for food policy regulation to an environmental issue. By using two concepts from Actor-Network Theory, *translation* and *script*, I will show *why* and *how* this move has happened, who the important actors were and what this tells us about the underlying politics of the time.

## On scripts and translations

In Actor-Network Theory (ANT) actor-networks are heterogenous and shifting assemblages in which human and non-human (nature, technology) actors are brought together to execute certain actions (Latour, 2005). Central in the mediation between objectives and action are the concepts of *translation* and *script*.

In this context *translation* is the “mechanism by which social and natural worlds progressively take form” (Callon, 1986, p.19). Through translation entities enrol and speak for each other (Law, 1992; Prout, 1996). This is a process before it is a result (Callon, 1986). This process is about reaching a settlement about often

<sup>1</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 can be found here: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg12>

<sup>2</sup> In Norway it is called “supplerende datomerking” (supplementary date labelling)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.adressa.no/nyheter/okonomi/2018/04/18/N%C3%A5-blir-det-mulig-%C3%A5-kj%C3%B8pe-mat-som-er-g%C3%A5tt-ut-p%C3%A5-dato-16504214.ece?cx\\_Deling=AddThis](https://www.adressa.no/nyheter/okonomi/2018/04/18/N%C3%A5-blir-det-mulig-%C3%A5-kj%C3%B8pe-mat-som-er-g%C3%A5tt-ut-p%C3%A5-dato-16504214.ece?cx_Deling=AddThis)



conflicting priorities of a variety of actors and between the objectives and strategies of human actors and the performances of technical and natural actors (Beveridge & Guy, 2009, p.72). The more actors are committed, the more stable the network.

In order to be made real, imperatives, issues and goals have to be translated into everyday practice and understanding, thereby becoming embedded in relations between actors. Seemingly humble and mundane technologies like a label can perform these translations. "If political rationalities render reality into the domain of thought, these 'technologies of government' seek to translate thought into the domain of reality" (Miller & Rose, 2008, p.32). However, this is an ongoing process: "for an actor-network to be extended over time and space, for power to be exercised at a distance, the actor-network has to be constantly produced and re-produced in socio-technical relations" (Beveridge & Guy, 2009, p. 73). It has to be translated and re-translated in very specific contexts of time and space through shifting constellations of actors (McLean & Hassard, 2004, p. 494). The case-study presented below shows how global goals are translated into everyday practice through the seemingly simple and mundane technology of date labelling. What is happening in Norway at the moment is a *re-scripting* of the date label, adding a voluntary, supplementary phrase to clarify how the expiration date should be understood and used.

In this article I deal with two notions of script. According to Akrich (1992), technologies (in the widest sense) contain a *script*. This script is based on the assumptions and hypotheses makers have about future users, it is "inscribed" into the objects or technologies and "prescribes" a specific use (Akrich, 1992, p. 208). The date label can be conceived as a double script: it is literally a script, printed on the package but it also *contains* a script, prescribing a specific understanding and use. However, this *script*, when moved through time and space, meeting different actors and objects, might take on different meanings and understandings through an ongoing negotiation process. Here the concepts of *translation* and *script* meet, and the messy translation processes takes the form of different *scripts*.

The issue of food waste, and its threat to global environmental sustainability, redirected the perspective and goals connected to the date label. Its original script (*best before*) was scrutinized and questioned. New actors emerged and traditional relations and political approaches were transformed. These changes, combined with the modified objectives and strategies of human actors, rendered the performance of the government technology date label not "up to date" anymore. Following the date label through time shows how these changes in actors and approaches have manifested in the *re-scripting* of the expiration date.

## Methods

By following a tool or a technology one can discover the different networks, assemblages and actors working on it and being worked upon and thereby identify wider issues, problems, politics and ideas. This case study is built on interviews, and first- and second-hand documents. Informants were selected based on their key roles within the processes and policies related to the (re)scripting of the date label both in the 1960/70s and today.

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 people about date labelling in general and the supplementary date label in particular. Sixteen informants were active in either the dairy industry (one of the first sectors where the supplementary date label was used) or in other parts of the food retail and production sector (for example Coop, Norgesgruppen and Asko). Further, I interviewed two employees from Forbrukerrådet (Norwegian Consumer protection agency), two from Matvett (the food and catering industry's interest organisation for the reduction of food waste),<sup>4</sup> two from Mattilsynet (Norwegian Food and Hygiene Authorities) and two NGOs against food waste. Interviews were taped and transcribed and then colour coded to identify patterns and recurrent themes. I also took part in sector meetings like the *The Nordic Food Waste Conference* in Oslo in 2017 and the *Consumers*

*in a Sustainable Food Chain Supply (Cosus) Conference* in 2017. Both conferences were taped, transcribed and colour coded (using the same codes as in the interviews).

To position the interviews in a wider context and to analyse the changes in ideas and issues over time, national and international law texts and reports were consulted and analysed, including the Codex Alimentarius (1962), the debates in both chambers of parliament (May 3 and 10, 1968), the Law about Food Labelling 1968, the Regulations about Food Labelling (1975, 1986, 1993) and the Food Information Regulation 2014 based on EU1169/2011, the UN Sustainable Development Agenda (2015) and the *bransjeavtale* (trade agreement) between government and food and hospitality industry of 2017. Furthermore, all issues of the *Forbrukerrapporten*, the quarterly magazine published by the Consumer Agency (1958-2010) and several newspaper articles from the 1960s and 1970s about the original date label and in the 2010s about the supplementary sentence were reviewed to gain insight into how ideas around food labelling and food waste changed over time in Norway.

Besides traditional media, I also conducted social media research, focusing on the aforementioned Facebook poll by TINE AS. All

4 The company was founded in 2012 is owned by the Interest organisation of Food and Beverage, the Foodservice Suppliers Association (DLF), the Grocery Store's Environment Forum and Interest organisation Tourism. Its main goal is to reduce food waste in Norway.



comments were printed and sorted according to the given answers and comments. The most interesting comments were from those voters who elaborated on their thoughts about this addition. Useful insights into consumers' perceptions and ideas about date labelling in general and the supplementary date label in particular could be gathered by this.

Between September and November 2018, I conducted an Internet survey among consumers in collaboration with NOFIMA (Research

institute for applied research within the fields of fisheries, aquaculture and food), which 373 people filled out. The data was coded and analysed (the two open questions offered particularly helpful insights into consumers' ideas and knowledge about the date label). As this overview shows, the complex techno-social assemblages and processes required a *multi-methods* approach (Brewer and Hunter 1989) that could handle and integrate different types of data.

## From Issue to Regulation – Translating Consumer Needs into the Date Label

Most food items are ephemeral and perishable (Watson & Meah, 2013; Mattila et al., 2018) making them fun and frightening at the same time (Fischler, 1988; Rozin, 1999). Naturally, food deteriorates and loses its quality over time. The date label was put in place in many countries during the second half of the last century to reshape nature (food) into measurable and calculable units (Asdal, 2004). It is “through technologies that political rationalities and the programmes of government that articulate them become capable of deployment” (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 63). In other words, the date label emerges as a means to deal with the perishability of food, translating the process of natural decay (natural time) into standardized, predictable shelf-life time. This legislation was based on high-modernist ideas (Scott, 1998) and a strong sense of “technocratic optimism” about science and technology solving most of humanities' problems (Myrvang et al., 2004).

The issue at stake was the problematic combination of the perishability of food and a growing industrialization of food production, which altered consumers' relationship to food considerably. New production and storing methods, food imports, the supermarket revolution (Olsen, 2010) and new packaging technologies like freezing, vacuum packing and tinning (see e.g. Finstad, 2013) distanced consumers from food production and made it more difficult to judge the age, safety and quality of food items (Sassatelli & Scott, 2001; Poulain, 2002; Kjaernes et al., 2007; Eden et al., 2008; Zachmann & Østby, 2011). This was deemed problematic by two actors within the consumer and food policy network. The recently founded Consumer Agency (Forbrukerråd)<sup>5</sup> and the Norwegian Labour Party (*Arbeiderpartiet*) who committed themselves to improving consumers' rights and advocated for a far-reaching law for consumer information and the labelling of consumer goods (including food). Guri Johannessen from the Labour Party for example argued that “consumers have a right to get basic information about products. There is a need for regulations that primarily focus on consumers' interests” (point

made during the 112. Ordentlige Stortingsforhandlingen (discussion in parliament) in Odelstinget, May 3, 1968).

To translate this issue into practice more actors had to be enrolled and technologies of government had to be constructed. To achieve this goal two strategies were chosen. First, consumers, still generally unaware of the issue, were enrolled by informing them about their rights and to the possibility to “vote with their fork” (Rem 2008). Articles like for example “Skillful consumers – a path to a higher standard of living” (May 1958) or “Think before you buy” (December 1958) in the abovenamed *Forbrukerrapporten* were used to do so. Second, the issue had to be translated into practical politics and government technologies. This had to be done against considerable opposition by both the food industry and more conservative political parties like *Høyre* (Conservative Party) and *Senterpartiet* (Centre Party). The fear was that a one-sided law would put Norwegian production, import and export at a disadvantage. When looking at the paperwork (reports, propositions, transcriptions of parliamentary debates) one can see how the original far-reaching law for product labelling, marketing and control was subsequently reduced to a pure labelling law, which was put into effect on May 24, 1968.

The law was followed by the National Regulation of Labelling of Consumer Goods (*Forskrift om merking av forbruksvarer*)<sup>6</sup> issued in 1975 by the Ministry for Consumers and Administration, which transformed the law into more concrete regulative policy. The issue of the perishability of food combined with the challenges of industrial food production and packaging had been translated into one, nationwide regulation. The unpredictable natural lifespan of food was standardized into shelf-life time, taking away consumers' insecurities about the quality and age of the food they were about to eat.

The newly established government technology date label was then able to “conceal for a time the process of translation itself”

5 The Consumer Agency was founded in 1953.

6 <https://lovdata.no/pro/autn/login#document/SF/forskrift/2014-11-28-1497?searchResultContext=1222&rowNumber=1&totalHits=51>



and turned “a network from a heterogenous set of bits and pieces each with its own inclinations, into something that passes as a punctualized actor” (Law, 1992, p. 386). Once a system or a technology is in place, the politics that led to it are often forgotten (Bowker & Star, 2000). The date label became “black boxed” (Latour, 1987, 1999) and the technical and scholarly work that had gone into it was rendered invisible to its users (*reference anonymized for review purposes*). The date label not only *delegated* the networks, decisions and actions that went into it, extending it through space and time (Latour, 1991; Prout, 1996) but also many consumer decisions and

considerations were delegated to the expiration date.

This label enables people to shop, and later eat, without making decisions within a wide array of topics – from hygiene and safety to legal and moral questions about value and waste. The expiration date is thus not a neutral label that describes a reality, but it produces the exact realities that it is describing (Asdal, 2015). A new issue arose due to a rising gap between what the creators of the date label had *in-scripted* into it and how its users came to understand it.

## Two Scripts, One Interpretation and the Growing Amounts of Food Waste

By legally pre-scribing date labels, the creators did not only literally inscribe a date on the package but they also *pre-scribed* a certain use, a relationship between the user and the product, imagining a path for future actions of users (Woolgar, 1991; Akrich, 1992). With the National Regulation of Labelling of Consumer Goods from 1975 two scripts had been created: *A use by (date)* and *a best before (date)*.<sup>7</sup> Highly perishable food (like fish or chicken) products have to be labelled with a use by date telling them the product is unsafe to consume after the date has passed and should be discarded. The other version of the script, the *best before* date informs the user that, according to the producer, the qualities (smell, taste, colour, content etc.) might deteriorate after the date. This date alerts consumers that a food item might not be at its best anymore but presumably could still be consumed without endangering a person's health. It was believed that these two versions would make it easy for consumers to distinguish between safe and unsafe food on the one hand and between optimal and sub-optimal on the other. However, many complex properties and qualities of food products (the outcome of the industrial food production process) are condensed into the script of the date label (Plasil, 2020) which makes it, even though mundane and simple at first glance, a complex and difficult *script* for consumers to use.

Unanticipated, consumers re-interpreted the two scripts and merged them into one – treating the quality related *best before* date as synonymous to the safety related *use by* (Evans, 2012; Watson & Meah, 2013; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2015; Bilchfeldt et al., 2015; Yngfalk, 2016; Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2018; Mattila et al., 2018; Närvänen et al., 2020). Rather than using it as a guideline, consumers came to see the *best before* date as a threshold that should not be crossed. Far from being easy about wasting food, consumers still do so because they believe that a product is not safe or at least not pleasant to eat once the *best before* date has passed (Aschemann-Witzel et al., 2018, p. 170). The following quote from the survey illustrates these perceptions:

“I am one of those people who throws away food immediately once it is out of date. I know I can smell it, and I do that, but once it is expired, I feel it smells bad and the carton looks blown up” (open question response in survey, September-November 2018).

Note how the date not only replaces the senses in the process of deciding what to eat and what to throw away, but also induces a particular perception (carton *looks* blown up), overriding the evidence provided by the senses. This perception of food caused by the misinterpretation of the *best before* date is an important contributor to growing amounts of food waste (European Union Committee 2014; Stensgård & Hanssen, 2015; Norstat Survey, 2016; Stensgård et al., 2018). “Cracks” in the *black box* date label became visible (Paxson, 2016), making it possible to re-construct and *re-script* it. The date label moved from being a food policy technology, guaranteeing food quality and safety, to becoming a “villain” in the fight against food waste (environmental politics). However, all my informants (even from NGO's fighting against food waste) agreed that simply removing the *best before* date would not be the solution as food quality cannot be sacrificed on the altar of sustainability:

“Quality is a tricky balance. It is an illusion, I think, thinking that consumers would eat food that they do not think is nice. We are such an affluent society that I cannot believe that Norwegian consumers would eat food that they do not experience as good. And if you have a shop that is full of old products, it is another supermarket chain that will survive.” (Interview Norgesgruppen, February 2018)

As this quote shows, it is an illusion to think that consumers today would accept poor quality or even insecurity about the age of food products. Today's consumers have high expectations about the food they want to purchase and use (De Hooge et al., 2017). How, then, to solve the of sustainable food production and consumption without sacrificing quality? How to reconcile individual consumer needs for

<sup>7</sup> See Forskrift om matinformasjon til forbrukene (matinformasjonsforskriften) (Regulation on the provision of food information to consumers) from 2014.

food quality and safety with a collective need for more sustainable food chains? In what ways were global goals translated into local policies in order to achieve better environmental sustainability

without touching too much upon food quality and consumer information? The events described below show how the re-scripting of the date label was an attempt to reconcile these different issues.

## Translating UN-Goals into Local Policy

UN Sustainable Development Goal No 12 states that by 2030 the amount of food waste should be substantially reduced through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse and explicitly mentions consumers and the need to educate them towards sustainable consumption and lifestyles (UN, n.d.). However, *how* this should be done is not outlined (Beveridge & Guy, 2009, p. 74) and as the UN lacks executive or coercive powers within nation states, these goals have to be translated into action on a local level, with local actors and local technologies.

Several steps were needed to translate these global goals into national policies and practical use. First, the government needed to find allies in the fight against food waste, and an agreement between industry and the state was reached. In June 2017 five ministries (headed by the Ministry for Climate and Environment) and 12 organisations representing food industry and trade signed the *Bransjeavtale om reduksjon av matsvinn* (Trade Agreement about the Reduction of Food Waste) (Government of Norway, 2017). Using voluntary agreements between government and food industry rather than enforcing strict rules to achieve certain policy goals is the norm in Norway as this statement from a researcher from Østfoldforskning<sup>8</sup> shows:

"This is more the Norwegian way, to have voluntary solutions. One has done the same with the recycling of packaging, called

Green Point, which was also a voluntary arrangement." (Interview Østfoldforskning, June 2017)

However, besides being the 'Norwegian way,' it also exemplifies a general shift in politics and policy making (not only in Norway but worldwide). After mandatory and enforced regulations that were the tools of the high-modernist discourse in the 1970s (Bull, 1990 [1982]; Stenersen & Libæk, 2003; Myrvang et al., 2004) there was a global shift towards voluntary agreements and self-regulation of the market within the neo-liberal system of today (Stenersen & Libæk, 2003; Venugopal, 2015; Pyysiainen et al., 2017; Frohlich, 2017). In accordance with UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3., the agreement states that industry and state will work together to reduce food waste by half by 2030. The agreement explicitly maintains that both industry and government shall take action to help consumers wasting less food (Trade Agreement, 2017). The next step, after enrolling the industry into the network for reducing food waste, now consumers had to – once again – be enrolled. But how to reach the consumers and how to help them waste less food?

In my interviews<sup>9</sup> I found that producers and government authorities generally identified the misinterpretation of the two scripts as the main issue that had to be resolved. The date label became the main actor that had to be worked on and its script may not only be the source of the problem but might offer a solution as well.

## Re-Scripting the Date Label

During the 2017 Nordic Food Waste Conference organized by the Nordic Council of Ministers in Oslo, Norgesgruppen, Norway's largest food retailer/producer presented a pilot project for testing an additional date on the food label. The head of the sustainability department, explained:

"It is a pilot project and it is run on a series of yogurt products that we have. The goal is to reduce food waste, not our own food waste but the consumers' food waste. It is also to increase the awareness of what the best before date means. The additional *normalt brukbar til* (normally useable until) indicates how long it normally can be eaten, even if not all the aspects of the quality are still there." (Chief advisor Sustainability Norgesgruppen)

From this statement it becomes clear that – at least in this case – rather than focusing on their own waste production, this company saw the more detailed information of consumers as the main path forward. After this short presentation, a discussion started between people who praised this idea as helping consumers to understand the expiration date and those who believed that additional information would confuse them. Here are a few opinions of the day:

"My first thought is that I'm concerned that it's confusing. This is plan B, this is when we decide that we are not able to educate the consumer about the meaning of the best before date, then we use this. I'm not ready to give up that we can educate the consumer to use their senses." (Veterinary from Danish Food Administration)

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8 Østfoldforskning is a national research institute focused on knowledge about sustainable social development. <https://www.ostfoldforskning.no/no/om-oss/>

9 This is supported by the abovenamed literature on the topic.



"I think we should look at this initiative as an "in addition to" not meaning that we should give up educating consumers. With the information so close to the date label, and not on a web site or far away from the purchase moment." (CEO Matvett, Interest organisation for the reduction of food waste)

"I think it's very important that when we talk about labelling is that we're aware that labels should be uniform for all kind of products. And it should be easily recognized from different types so that you will always find the same information in the same way. So, you don't make differences between products." (Norwegian Food Safety and Hygiene Authorities).

These three statements reveal several competing concerns, needs and priorities. The two employees of the food authorities from Norway and Denmark were much more concerned with a uniform, standardized and non-confusing message towards consumers, which furthermore would not make (marketing) differences between products. The CEO of the industry's interest organisation to reduce food waste (Matvett) understandably had more the waste-reductive powers of a possible new script in mind than uniformity and standards. However, even though no concrete agreement on how to inform the consumers best had been reached that day, it was clear that the strategy of the Norwegian government was working in practice. The food industry was offering a possible solution by presenting the idea during an international conference, new actors could be enrolled (even though not all agreeing with the strategy – yet) and new coalitions became possible. The date label had "officially" been identified as the technology that could bring about change and its *best before* script became the tool to be worked on. In order to make explicit to consumers what the *best before* script meant (possibly reduced quality but most likely edible) and how it should be used (do not throw away but check it) a new *script* was in the making.

However, Norgesgruppen were not the only ones working on re-scripting the date label. While they were busy testing and surveying their pilot,<sup>10</sup> another food producing company, Q-Meieriene (Q-Dairy), had their own approach. Q-Meieriene surprised the industry and the authorities with their own supplementary date label: *best før (dato) men ikke dårlig etter* (best before (date) but not bad after). According to the CEO of Q-Meieriene they had responded to a challenge put in front of them by an activist and blogger (*Spis opp maten* or Finish your food) (with approximately 30,000 Facebook followers). In March 2016, on national channel TV2, this activist challenged food producers to address the fact that date labels contribute to unnecessary consumer waste. According to her, Q-Meieriene

was the only company responding, and they agreed to add her suggested *but not bad after* to the original date label. Here we can see the engagement of yet another group of actors – besides government, industry and interest organisations also activists became involved in the process of re-scripting the words and *re-scripting* the use of the date label. While new actors emerged, some previous actors (Consumer Agency) were absent from the scene and others (government and political parties) acquired new, less prominent roles as the following will demonstrate. In the first half of 2017 two different supplementary date labels were in use.<sup>11</sup> This alarmed the Norwegian Food and Hygiene Authorities, Mattilsynet, who feared that differing scripts would lead to confusion rather than clarification among consumers. One of their employees explained the legal backdrop: "The Food Information Regulation says that if you provide voluntary information, this information should not be misleading, it should not be ambiguous and should not confuse" (Interview with senior advisor Mattilsynet, February 2018).

To reach an agreement within the industry two meetings were held. In November 2017 Mattilsynet explained their viewpoint and the legal requirements of any supplementary date labelling. After giving a presentation about the legal requirements, Mattilsynet left the scene to the guidance and coordination of Matvett, an interest organisation owned by the Norwegian food industry, aimed at the reduction of food waste. In order to reach a consensus, Matvett called for another meeting at the beginning of 2018, where several important actors from the food industry (including Norgesgruppen, TINE and Q-Meieriene) agreed on one, uniform, voluntary supplementary date label. During this meeting they decided that the new script would be *best before (date), often good after*. One of the reasons for deviating from the already existing but *not bad after* was that meat producers could not guarantee 100% safety after the *best before date*. This meant that TINE AS, the example from the beginning of the article, had to change the supplementary date label from *not bad after*, which they had already started using, to *often good after* even though consumers had voted otherwise. Against consensus within the industry, Q-meieriene decided to keep *not bad after*.<sup>12</sup> The reason to do so was not only that their supplementary label had already been established and was widespread, but they also considered this a stronger message.

I discovered the same assumptions when reviewing the aforementioned TINE Facebook poll. Besides voting for their favourite wording many left positive comments. There were however several critical voices, accusing TINE of being a copycat from Q-meieriene. This shows that these consumers interpreted

<sup>10</sup> Their approach of adding another date onto the label did not prove to be practical in the end. The possible danger of consumers confusing the two dates in addition to the danger of the dates being confused in the printing process led to the abolition of this approach. Furthermore, Norgesgruppen agreed that there should be a uniform wording for date labels in Norway.

<sup>11</sup> One by Norgesgruppen and one by Q-Meieriene and later TINE AS.

<sup>12</sup> Being asked about their preference only 15% of the respondents of the survey preferred "not bad after". The reason for this many stated was that "bad" sound too negative.



the supplementary sentence as a creative, fun marketing strategy that had been copied by TINE, rather than a coordinated campaign for consumer information for which a single and unified wording would be necessary. This interpretation also opens questions about the underlying objectives within the food industry besides helping consumers to better understand the date label. This quote taken from an interview with Norgesgruppen shows that the underlying goals were two-fold:

"The environmental plans were primarily about our own operations, but in the field of food waste we saw that we were dependent on cooperation in the food chain to solve some of the challenges. After working on the theme for many years,

it has also been natural to take action towards the consumer and there is probably a certain reputation effect that is part of the motivation." (Chief adviser sustainability, Norgesgruppen, February 2018)

This quote shows, first, a commitment to a more sustainable production but, second, an ambition to boost Norgesgruppen's reputation as a green, sustainable and consumer friendly company in the eye of the "consumer-citizen" (Neilson & Paxton, 2010). It is easier to change words on a label than essentials within production and consumption. The question is now, will the supplementary date label have the desired effect of successfully translating sustainability goals through changed user practice?

## A Process - Not a Result (Yet)

As stated before, translation is a process before it becomes a result (Callon, 1986). The Norwegian approach of changing the script of the date label has not stabilized yet. Many actors were enrolled in the process: the Norwegian government and food authorities, large parts of the food production and retail industry, interest organisations and activists. The newly adapted date label is settling into the food market. By the end of 2019 several products were labelled with the supplementary label (mainly dairy products but also eggs, orange juice, flour, and flat bread) and one of the main supermarket chains stated that they would label all their products with the supplementary label.<sup>13</sup> Sweden announced that it will follow the example of its neighbour (SVT Nyheter, 2018) and there has been international media attention for the 'Norwegian way' of re-scripting the date label in order to address household waste.<sup>14</sup>

However, there are still two competing supplementary date labels, which could lead to further consumer confusion and irritation within the industry. Some of the actors I spoke to are still reluctant to implement the new script for several reasons. There was discussion within the industry around how much money and effort should go into redesigning existing labels to accommodate the new phrase. For one smaller dairy company for example the costs were not (yet) worth the (uncertain) results. They also claimed that the two parts of the phrase mean the same:

"Can we not rather look at what best before really means? This supplementary text actually says exactly the same that best before stands for." (Interview Rørosmeieriet, March 2018).

Furthermore, while the interest organisation for waste reduction within the industry, Matvett, is promoting the supplementary date label (Matvett, n.d.), the Consumer Agency was less enthusiastic.

They had neither been actively involved (something they did not approve of) nor were they convinced that consumers should be the main focus in the food waste discussion: "producers should not delegate their responsibility towards consumers but look at their own waste as well." They were also concerned that what consumers really need is the longest possible shelf-life, not "just" changes in the script (Interview with Forbrukerrådet, September, 2018).

The question remains how much the change in the script will influence the use of the date label. At the moment of writing it is not possible to quantify the influence of the addition of *often good after* to the original *best before* on consumer waste behaviour and household waste directly (by consumers reading and adhering to the phrase) and indirectly (due to media raising public awareness of the waste problem). The latest report on food waste in Norway is from 2018 and therefore does not contain data about the change in wording (Elstad Stensgård et al. 2018). When asked about their thoughts about the supplementary date labelling many respondents from the survey answered positively. Here some representative quotes:

"I think the new labelling is positive, it makes us more aware that date labelling is not crucial to the use of the product. The new date labelling has started discussion about food waste."

"It is good that they now use *often good after*. You are a little more confident that it is possible to eat food after the expiry date. Especially since I live with a person who is very picky about food when it comes to the expiration date."

"Good! I feel safer to eat a product after the date."

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.rema.no/artikler/nyheter/vi-merker-alle-egne-varer-med-ofte-god-etter/>

<sup>14</sup> Documentary on Spiegel TV: Teller statt Tonne, 3rd of March 2018. <https://www.zdf.de/gesellschaft/plan-b/plan-b-teller-statt-tonne-100.html>; Norway's Top Dairy Introduces 'Best Before, but Not Bad After' Label to Fight Food Waste, 9th of January 2018: <https://www.dairyreporter.com/Article/2018/01/09/TINE-changes-label-after-Facebook-campaign-to-Best-before-but-not-bad-after>; Norway's Top Dairy Introduces 'Best Before, but Not Bad After' Label to Fight Food Waste, 10th of January 2018: <https://www.thedailymeal.com/drink/norway-introduces-best-by-not-bad-after-label>



Others were less enthusiastic and experienced the supplementary sentence as “tautological as *good after* is the same as *best before*” or “confusing”. A few respondents even saw the whole change as a marketing campaign: “It is all about marketing and competition to get their product sold. The products have the same durability as before,” while others were positive but admitted this would not change their buying habits.

Interestingly 77% of the respondents answered that the new script explains the meaning of the date label better and 64% admitted they felt safer to use out-of-date products due to the supplementary date label. However, at the same time 67% of the

same respondents answered that they do not need the addition as they *do* understand the original *best before* well enough. Many explained in the open questions that even though they thought it was a good idea and might be important for others for themselves it was not necessary as they knew the right use of the best before label already before.<sup>15</sup> This shows that the process has not settled and that not all necessary actors have been equally successful enrolled in the network yet. In order to be effective, the addition to the date label has to be translated into action, made real and its recommendation has to become as entrenched into the minds and practices of consumers as the first part of the sentence is.

## Conclusive Remarks: Making Sense of the Process

By using the two concepts of *translation* and *script* this case has shed light on how global issues and goals can be put into action and practice. The UN Sustainable Development Goals were translated into use by enrolling different actors into the network and by activating the persuasiveness of the date label. The outcome of the *translation* process was an addition to the script, which performed the function of a *script*.

Following the date label through time reveals the changes and shifts that happened between the construction of the original date label in the 1960s/70s and its re-scripting today. The date label has moved out of the exclusive realm of food policy and into the domain of environmental politics. The misinterpretation of the *best before* script led to great amounts of avoidable food waste – a problem that had been identified by scientist, media, activists, and by (supra) national governing bodies. However, the same actors realized that abandoning the *best before* date altogether would sacrifice the individual need for food quality and security. The challenge was how do reduce household food waste without reducing the need for consumer information and food quality. Looking at both, the scripting and re-scripting of the date label, it is possible to identify processes of translating issues and goals into practical politics and daily use through the enrolment of different actors and the employment of technologies for governing. This is a messy process with changing actors, approaches and goals.

In the 1960s/70s the Consumer Agency together with Norwegian Labour Party promoted the issue of food quality and consumer education against the competing needs of the food industry and several conservative parties. During the recent changes the government and even the food authorities acted rather from the side lines, leaving the initiative to the food industry, its interest organization and individual consumer activists. This shift in agency marks a change from a high-modernist (change through state rules and regulations) to a neo-liberal economic-political agenda

promoting not only “a withdrawal of the state from market regulation, but the establishment of market-friendly mechanisms and incentives to organize a wide range of economic, social and political activity” (Venugopal, 2015, p. 172). The new assemblages of human actors around the date label, the shift in taking action from government to industry and the transfer of responsibility from the collective to the individual that are visible in the re-scripting of the date label exemplify this change. However, not only the actors changed but also the way in which issues were translated into practice. Instead of using binding legal regulations like in the 1970s, today’s addition is done on a voluntary basis and although the original date label could and did not enforce compliance from all consumers (e.g., dumpster divers) the *often good after* leaves even more room for consumer interpretation as it is not absolute but relative to individual food items. The neo-liberal individualization manifests itself in shifting responsibility for taking the “right” decisions, moving the food products economically and sustainably away from not only the government and its agents but also from producers and towards the consumer.

Here I want to add some critical notes about this change. First, it is of course easier to change words than people’s behaviour. Or rather, changing a script is easier than making the new script effective. As not only the statements about the continuing necessity of consumer education during the Nordic Food Waste Conference but also some of the quotes from the survey show, changing words might remind people to use their senses but may not really change consumer attitudes and practices. This has possibly to be done on a different level than on the label, starting at a young age, instilling trust in the senses again rather than in government and industry standards. This will take a more concerted (and possibly more expensive) effort from the government and authorities working with food, consumers and education – not only on a national but also an international level. Second, while this approach shifts responsibility – yet again (Evans, 2011) – away from the industry towards the consumer, who is

<sup>15</sup> This understanding of the date label could stem from the fact that people who are more interested in the topic and therefore already better informed are generally more likely to fill in surveys than those who are not.



expected to make environmental responsible choices; the constant availability of cheap food, large packages, 3-for-2 offers and a market of ever fresher, more short-lived and constantly changing products, flavours and food fashions lie deeper at the heart of the problem than the wording of the date label. Third, and connected to the two criticisms above, even producers admitted that the change in words was not only done for pure environmental but economic reasons as well. Changing words to make products *look* environmentally responsible is after all easier than changing production, retail strategies and marketing in essentials.

It is not easy to predict how the addition to the date label will help reducing household food waste. The process of translation is not settled yet. Many actors are still reluctant, others have

competing ideas or feel that they were left out. Furthermore, there are still two different supplementary scripts in use and far from all products bear the new label. The supplementary date label tries to balance two competing needs and issues. One the one hand it has to make sure food is safe and fresh enough to eat, on the other it adds a level of concern, a reminder about the senses and ultimately about its own fallacy. This article set out to present several issues surrounding the date label, making sense of its (re-)construction and inherent script and to unravel the processes of translation of goals into practice the date label (is hoped to) brings about. Only time will tell whether the messy process of re-scripting will lead to a better understanding and use of the date label.

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