

e-labelling: A low-hanging fruit

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Manufacturers should be allowed to display compliance information electronically instead of printing the label on products, argues Cecilia Bonefeld-Dahl

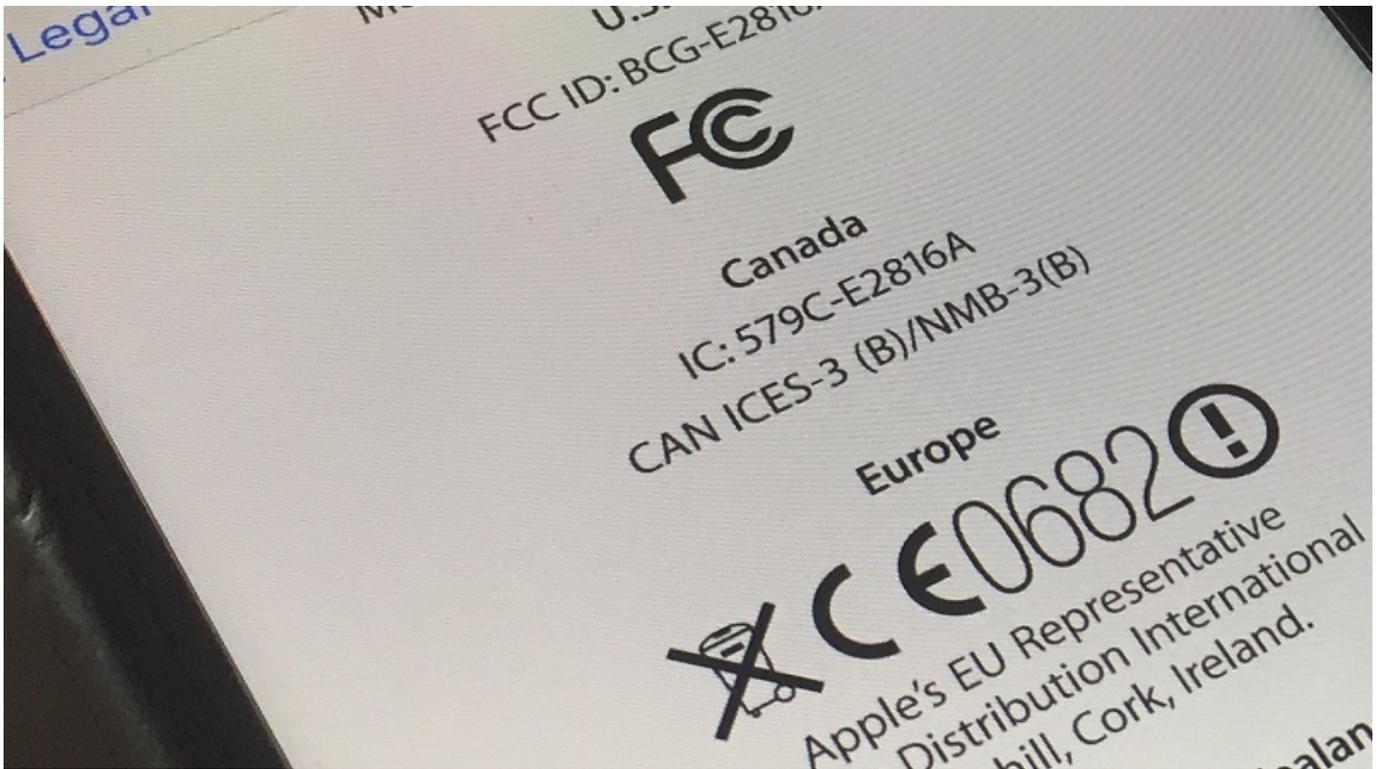


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Digitalisation is happening across our lives. We hardly write letters any more and we avoid hardcopy documents and information such as pay slips, bank statements, booking confirmations and tickets.

Allowing manufacturers to label their products electronically instead of physically marking them seems to be a digital no-brainer.

Yet, the European Union is the last major economy clinging to physical labels. The United States, China, Japan, even Ghana or Malaysia—to name just a few countries—have all adopted e-labelling.

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Europe's delay is quite astonishing since e-labelling isn't even a new concept. It has been around for almost two decades when manufacturers of software-defined radios in the US voluntarily used e-labelling. As a legally recognised alternative to physical labels, it was first introduced eight years ago in Australia in 2010.

Today, 56 per cent of the global economy has adopted e-labelling. If the EU legally recognised e-labelling this figure would rise to 78 per cent.

So what does e-labelling mean in practice? Currently, manufacturers selling in the EU are compelled to print on each of their products all the labels necessary to demonstrate compliance.

This is why your smartphone has a series of undecipherable signs on its back, and why some laptop chargers are covered in logos and text. In the European ICT sector, 20 per cent of the cost of compliance - or **€797m every year** [6] - goes to simply show information.

"We now have the opportunity to include a provision in the proposed regulation on Compliance and Enforcement, in the so-called "Goods package". But this is probably the last chance that we will have for many years to legally recognise e-labelling in the EU"

e-labelling would simply allow manufacturers to display compliance information directly on the screen of devices when appropriate. When the product is not connected to a screen, companies could use a single machine-readable code (for example a QR code) to refer to the relevant compliance information.

Quite a meagre change it would seem. Yet, e-labelling would reduce the cost of indicating compliance by as much as 14 per cent - or **€112m per year** [7] - in the ICT sector alone.

Besides, both Market Surveillance Authorities and companies agree that it would also have a positive environmental impact and improve the traceability of products while only having negligible costs of introduction.

Allowing manufacturers to provide basic compliance information in an electronic rather than physical way-as an alternative option alongside traditional physical labelling-is a digital no-brainer. The only question is when will the EU finally catch-up?

Example of electronic labelling:



A label **embedded in the software of devices with built-in screen or devices without a built-in screen but that can be connected to a screen**. This label can be accessed in maximum three steps, for instance by entering a specific code into the device, even when locked.



A **QR code or other machine-readable code (surface labelling) for equipment without an in-built screen and that cannot be connected to a screen**. This code links to a web page, which can be updated and may include additional information.

We now have the opportunity to include a provision in the proposed regulation on Compliance and Enforcement, in the so-called “Goods package”. But this is probably the last chance that we will have for many years to legally recognise e-labelling in the EU.

The European Parliament’s IMCO vote on this regulation is on 3 September and e-labelling amendment 241 is fully supported by industry.

We urge MEPs to support the e-labelling amendment 241 and to finally allow the use of e-labelling in Europe. It is high time to catch-up.

About the author

Cecilia Bonefeld-Dahl is the Director-General of DIGITALEUROPE

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