How do rules and norms expand internationally? In particular, how do those soft rules, which are generated by non-state actors, travel and impact new regions, and become modified? We tackle this question with the study of the international expansion of the Michelin Red Guide rating of restaurants and investigate the expansion of these soft rules within a sociomaterial perspective.

Surprisingly, the role of material features in regulation systems has been little studied so far. For norms, rules and institutions are made tangible and active through their material entanglements. By material, we mean more than physicality and refer rather to both material and form (Leonardi, 2012). Material elements are indeed both generated and used through social processes. They result from social interactions, and they structure the interactions and practices of their various users (Leonardi, 2012, 32; Carlile et al., 2013, 7). In particular, it is such materiality that makes norms and symbolic features alive.

Soft regulations such as international evaluation, ratings, rankings and accreditations are particularly critical in this perspective (Pollock, 2012). In the transnational arena (Hannerz, 1996), institutions, rules, classification systems, standards, evaluations and audits, assessment and accreditation, and comparison and rankings have proliferated (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). Many contemporary organizational fields are driven by such soft regulation: the medical care, education, finance and banking sectors, for example. Yet, despite their interest in the development and spread of norms, rules and institutions, institutional scholars have paid little attention to the material features of such regulation and their associated sociomaterial practices (Jones et al., 2013). We therefore aim to contribute to this growing literature with the examination of how a soft-regulating actor expands its rules transnationally and transforms existing practices and fields. For this purpose we investigate the
case of the Michelin gastronomic Red Guide and how it developed from Europe to new locations around the world. The Michelin guide precisely exemplifies this new form of regulation and its sociomaterial effects. We specifically focus on the key role played by material elements in Michelin’s expansion.

In the first section of this chapter, we review institutional literature on soft norms and their expansion, and suggest that adopting a sociomaterial perspective is beneficial to better understand how norms expand and then modify practices and thereby, a field. Then we present our empirical study and analyse how the Michelin Red Guide expanded to Tokyo and New York, while keeping the features of its rating system stable. With this study, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of how the ‘symbolic and the material are intertwined and constitutive of one another’ (Thornton et al., 2012, 10). Taking place in a transnational context, our study provides a unique example of material stability and its consequences on sociomaterial practices.

Background

As suggested by Hannerz (1996), our world is growingly transnationally. In this world, regulating actors are not only the states, but also individuals, groups, movements and companies. Over the last decades, regulation by non-state actors spread and grew significantly (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). These actors, like other regulators, elaborate and issue rules, and they also elaborate and activate ‘the processes to monitor adoption and implementation of those rules’ (Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, 1). Such regulation by non-state actors is said to be ‘soft’: it is non-hierarchical regulation that is not legally binding. Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2006) further distinguish three modes of soft regulation. The first one is rule-setting: soft-regulators set standards, codes of conduct and guidelines. The second mode of regulation is monitoring. It serves to guarantee rule-following (whether the rules have been set in advance or not; Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006, 254) and largely contributes to the proliferation of auditing at large. As such, it contributes to both regulate and shape activities. The third soft-regulation mode is agenda-setting, that is, the discussion and definition of what is considered good and desirable practice. As Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson (2006) further point out, these three modes of regulation can be either used alternatively or in mutually reinforcing combination. However, they also echo specific forms of authority and compliance: organizing (when actors voluntarily ‘bind themselves to following the rules issued by’ the organization they join; Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson 2006, 259), expertise (when it makes sense to follow rules because they are pertinent and based on experience) and authority through association (with other rules, regulations or rule-makers).