

Counting sheep, dreaming of future technologies

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The three-year Marsden-funded research titled "Counting Sheep: NZ Merino in an Internet of Things," aims to understand how collecting and sharing farm data online can reshape how people and animals interact with each other.

Over the past two years, Dr Anne Galloway, a design ethnographer and senior lecturer in Victoria's School of Design, travelled the country visiting merino stations, A&P shows, shearing and woolhandling competitions, labs and offices, in order to understand what matters to the people who produce New Zealand merino.

Based on her findings, Dr Galloway and student researchers created fictional scenarios which combine evocative designs and storylines about future production and consumption of merino sheep and products.

"Today's farms can generate and collect large amounts of data," says Dr Galloway. "Our aim is to figure out what people can do with this information, and understand the kinds of science and technology people want—or don't want—in the future."

The fictional scenarios are designed to explore people's hopes and fears about technology, imagine where they might lead in the future, and challenge us to think differently. They include growing your own lamb, woollen casts knitted over broken bones, a new half-dog half-lamb companion for every New Zealander, and a wool shed for public use in the city.

"We want to know, for example, if a scenario like 'Grow Your Own Lamb' gives too much power to consumers, or if 'PermaLamb' changes issues around animal welfare. We want to understand what people think are good and bad uses of technology—before researchers, businesses, and governments make them happen."

Anyone can participate in the study by taking a brief [online](#) survey about the scenarios (countingsheep.info/). The goal is to provoke an instinctive response, says Dr Galloway. "So far, we've heard everything from 'I would rather die than live in this world' to 'this is the most brilliant thing I've ever seen'." The survey is open until 15 June, 2014.

The researchers will make the results available online and they hope the online process they are running to encourage public debate will help inform policy makers on how new technologies can be harnessed.

Provided by Victoria University

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