

Not all digital innovations are beneficial

On 22 September, data scientist Sjaak Wolfert and Louise Fresco gave the WUR Mansholt Lecture in Brussels.

Digital innovations can have undesirable side effects that are not always easy to predict, says data scientist Sjaak Wolfert. He is not just referring to ethnic profiling using facial recognition. He points to the food delivery service thuisbezorgd.nl, which has monopolized the delivery of meals in the Netherlands to such an extent that individual restaurants have little alternative than to join thuisbezorgd.nl. How can you prevent such dependency? By thinking about the setup for innovative digital solutions at the start, says Wolfert. In the past few years, he was the project manager of the EU project Internet of Food and Farm 2020, which investigated and guided digital innovations.

For example, firms in the farm sector such as Agrifirm, CRV and FrieslandCampina set up a digital platform for dairy farmers. Farmers can become members of this joint-data platform, says Wolfert, but the rules specifically state that the platform cannot be taken over. That way, you make sure the farmers don't become dependent on tech giants when using sensors and digital software in their barns.

Hubs

Responsible digital innovations are complex processes, says Wolfert, because you have to consider the technology, economics and embedding in society. In the European project, it turned out there were at least 30 start-ups working on sensors to monitor cows' health. Wolfert's project brought them in contact with one another so they could decide to share their know-how or alternatively to differentiate their products.

Now Wolfert wants to set up a network of Smart Agri Hubs in Europe, where entrepreneurs collaborate on innovations in local hubs and share information with other hubs. AS