This year the best paper award committee received many nominations for the best paper. While the competitiveness was very high, this article received a consensus by the panel of judges for demonstrating a strong contribution to scholarship that addresses sociological perspectives in or about communication and information technology.

Serving on a committee such as this, one gets to see first hand at the richness and excellence and breadth of research that is occurring among our members. It’s not serendipity that one finds excellent papers in the best paper pool but I for one am happy for the exposure to articles that I might not otherwise be searching for. That brings us to this years top paper.

The CITASA 2010 best paper award goes to James Evans for his Article “Electronic Journals and the Narrowing of Science and Scholarship,” in Science.

This paper manages to condense an amazing amount of theory (including Newton and Darwin) and research into Science’s limited format. It gets us to rethink some basic premises of the sociology of knowledge and our own common sense – being more “efficient” researchers does not make us smarter researchers. Evans offers compelling evidence that electronic journal systems may constrain the casual exploration we do as scholars when we browse library stacks. The article asks us to think critically about how digital tools are changing the production of knowledge.

It is methodologically rigorous and an important admonishment to the academy that the fun part of our work—reading broadly, cross pollinating ideas, and exploring new literatures—is very important for advancing research.

This paper suggests a counter intuitive and critical analysis to a large set of data of 34 million articles and their citations from 1945-2005. Evans is able to demonstrate that increasing accessibility to digital articles through search brings scholars to cite fewer, more recent and more concentrated in scope journals and articles – paradoxically, the opposite of what we would expect from so-called better library research methods. In his words: “Poor indexing likely had unintended consequences that assisted the integration of science and scholarship. By drawing researchers through unrelated articles, print browsing and perusal may have facilitated broader comparisons and led researchers into the past.”

He shows that the ease of access to information comes at the expense of critical thinking and interdisciplinarity. Again, in evan’s words: “As 21st-century scientists and scholars use online searching and hyperlinking to frame and publish their arguments more efficiently, they weave them into a more focused—and more narrow—past and present.”

With this article, Evans was able to reach out to other scientific audiences with a distinctly sociological lens. Please join me in congratulating James Evans on an exemplary piece of scholarship.