

<http://www.mercurynews.com/2016/12/24/montgomery-on-ucscs-outrageous-mass-destruction-of-books/>

Over the summer [2016], workmen removed most of the remaining books from our Science and Engineering Library at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Roughly 80,000 books, worth between \$2-\$6 million were destroyed [shredded] or shipped off campus to distant storage facilities.

The act was taken with virtually no faculty input.

In 1990, when I arrived to work at UCSC, I took pride in our Science Library.

By 2000 new journals were no longer displayed.

By 2010 the journal room was gone, turned into a large study. We could no longer browse new journals.

After journals had been vanquished, the next enemy was clear: books.

At the beginning of this Fall quarter I entered the library. No books on the first floor. I walked up to the second floor, where the math and physics collection used to be. Nothing. No books.

Space. Lots of space. Students scattered around on their devices. Some eating. Some drinking.

When my mother died, there was her chair left in the living room, the red chair with tattered holes on the right arm, white stuffing poking through, cigarette marks, sitting in the open sun. The second floor of the library was that chair, that hospital room, cleared out, cleaned, the sun streaming in, empty after the machines had been unplugged.

In shock, I went down to talk to a librarian. "What happened to all the books? I'd heard some were left."

He gave me a wan smile. "They're in the basement."

Down in the basement about half the original collection of math and physics books huddled dejectedly in a corner, valiant survivors.

I've since found that the phenomenon of shrinking and destroying university research libraries is international. But as we like to say here at UCSC, we are at the vanguard.

Our head librarian prefers the word "de-duplicate" to "destroy", "remove" or "shred".

The rationale behind de-duplication? Space. Empty study space with desks for the flood of 600 additional students UC Santa Cruz was pressured to admit this Fall.

How did the library staff decide what books to de-duplicate? Data, analytics, the ubiquitous algorithm, devoid of a human element. If a book had not been touched, according to library data, in the last five years, then it went on their chopping list.

This rationality ignores the library's clients: humans.

My friend Gildas, a biblical scholar, went to the Science library last week to consult an important book on ancient technologies. He had consulted the book several times before. Oops! De-duplicated.

Like me and many users of libraries, Gildas marks the place from which he takes a book and carefully reshelves it when he is done, saving the library staff reshelving work. The algorithm missed his book and now it is shredded or moldering in a distant storage facility.

A copy of Gildas's book does survive. At UCSF. Its survival now depends, like that of our entire de-duplicated collection, on the kindness of distant librarians.

No chance was given to students or faculty to buy the books. Millions of dollars of public property was destroyed. A long-standing and painstakingly collected archive was removed to solve a temporary space problem.

The library "lost" the list of the books which it de-duplicated, so we don't know which among them were rare or important. We are still waiting for the library staff to recover their list.

In the meantime: don't reshelve your books.

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