

The Pivot: Phase 2 of 2CUL Technical Services Integration

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Abstract

The Columbia and Cornell University Libraries' partnership (2CUL) is now in its fifth year. Its composite acronym (2CUL), which condenses a doubling of the two participating libraries' initial letters, summarizes both vision and mission: a broad integration of library activities in a number of areas – including collection development, acquisitions and cataloging, e-resources and digital management, and digital preservation, and reciprocal onsite use of collections. A key component of the partnership is 2CUL Technical Services Integration (TSI), an initiative funded by a generous three-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to plan for the merger of technical services operations. The authors reported on the first phase of this project last year in this forum (Kate Harcourt and Jim LeBlanc, "Planning from the Middle Out: Phase 1 of 2CUL Technical Services Integration," *Collaborative Librarianship* 6:1 (2014)). In this paper, they draw on the existing literature on collaboration, both within libraries and beyond, to report and reflect on the second phase of the TSI project and, in particular, the decision to reconceive TSI as an evolving set of mutually beneficial initiatives rather than a more comprehensive administrative integration of technical services operations. The period covered in this article is December 2013-December 2014.

Keywords: 2CUL; Technical services; Integrated technical services; Columbia University; Cornell University

Introduction

Envisioned as an ambitious next step in the "transformative and enduring partnership" between the Columbia and Cornell University Libraries, known as 2CUL,¹ Technical Services Integration (TSI) sought to integrate incrementally the central technical services operations of both institutions. The overarching goal of TSI was to create a single, unified, and deeply collaborative operation that would support the broader goals of 2CUL by means of:

1. A reconception of the institutions' separate library operations to achieve integration across both campuses by realigning staff responsibilities, workflows, and reporting lines;
2. A transformation of the vision, priorities, and values of both libraries' technical services to support the overall institutional goals for 2CUL and to view inter-

institutional collaboration as fundamental to regular library operations.²

The partner institutions anticipated that savings in staff time and effort within the integrated technical services divisions would create additional capacity for new initiatives and projects for both institutions.

During the first phase of the project (September 2012-December 2013), 2CUL TSI planners established an infrastructure to encourage and guide the integration. A key aspect of this infrastructure was the creation of ten working groups, each representing a different functional area of technical services, with leads from both institutions, to provide first-hand expertise and middle-out leadership for the integration. Designed to empower mid-level managers and other key staff to design, test, and evaluate the integration as the work proceeded, the middle-out technique was an appealing option for fulfilling a charge that included both organizational im-

provement and, crucially, staff support for and engagement in that improvement.³ As much planning and testing as possible was left to the staff members who know their library functions best and could act on their findings – usually supervisors and unit heads. These teams were charged to review all aspects of their operations and to submit recommendations, ideas, and suggestions to the TSI Steering Committee for moving the project beyond this initial stage. Underlying these specific aims for the functional working groups was the understanding that members of these teams would get to know each other and get used to working together in preparation for an operational integration in 2015, including migration to a next-generation integrated library system (ILS). The working groups did a remarkable job on this initial assignment, submitting a rich array of insightful and comprehensive reports. Plans for the second phase of TSI called for the newly formed TSI Joint Senior Managers Integration Network (JSMIN, or “Jasmine”) to review the reports and recommendations of the functional working groups, revise the teams’ charges as needed, and re-launch the groups with the overarching directive to begin an incremental “soft integration of 2CUL technical services operations, one idea at a time, over an 18-month period.”⁴ Integral to this effort would be: (1) evaluating and testing options for streamlining and improving workflows, individually or jointly, to maximize effectiveness and improve service to users, (2) investigating ways to expand the collective scope of 2CUL technical services in cost-effective ways, and (3) working with TSI Steering, JSMIN, and other stakeholders to extend TSI models, innovations, insights, and cultural synergy to other library operations and divisions within the partner institutions. It was clear that not every functional area was ready to integrate, especially those that relied heavily on a shared ILS to realize the anticipated benefits of integration, but the overall aim of the planning effort remained the establishment of a consolidated 2CUL Technical Services by the end of 2015.

By spring of 2014, TSI planners realized that the functional teams were having serious difficulties fulfilling their charge to plan for even a “soft” (stepwise) integration. The logistics involved in establishing institutional-level support for the

project had become far more complex than expected. In this paper, we will examine some of the fundamental factors that lay behind these obstacles, as well as a new vision that informed the reconception of TSI in mid-2014. We will also look forward to the next steps in this 2CUL planning initiative during its third and final year.

Questioning the Hypothesis

In Phase 1 of the project, the 2CUL TSI Steering Committee performed an environmental scan, including reviews of library literature for guidance in carrying out its charge. They arranged meetings, conference calls, and/or site visits with key stakeholders in other collaborative ventures involving integration of technical services functions. Surprisingly, they also discovered what turned out to be an important planning concept for TSI in the work of someone from outside the field of library science and practice, someone from the world of start-ups and customer development.

Steve Blank is an entrepreneur and academician who has been called one of the “Godfathers of Silicon Valley.”⁵ He speaks, teaches, and publishes on customer development and startup companies. Library technical services may seem far removed from the business world, but Blank’s thoughts on reducing failure through sound business model design and agile development can be applied to any innovative initiative, especially a radical and high-risk collaboration such as 2CUL TSI. Of particular interest for TSI is Blank’s concept of “the pivot.” In his short video, “Steve Blank on the Pivot,” he tells his audience to test planning assumptions frequently, as it is always possible that one or more of the hypotheses that govern the plan will no longer be correct. If you discover errors, rather than firing the executives, you “fire the model.” He refers to this action as a “pivot,” which is essentially a response to the question: “What do you do when your hypotheses don’t meet reality?” A pivot, then, is a “substantive change to one or more components” of the model.⁶

In the case of TSI, what wasn’t working and why? Working extensively with our universities’ legal, financial, and labor offices, we real-

ized there were essentially four key barriers to integration, four ways in which our original hypothesis did not meet reality.

1. Columbia and Cornell staff may not supervise or report to staff *in any way or at any level* at the partner library. Columbia's union environment is an added complication. The overhead required to support two parallel administrative structures for what was intended to be a single operational division would significantly erode any ongoing savings or efficiencies.
2. Neither library may authorize the spending of the other's money. We knew this from the start, but potential workarounds for this problem subsequently appeared to be more cumbersome and inefficient than we originally envisioned.
3. Uncertainty about the purchase of a new ILS has hampered planning and testing of joint workflows. The implementation of a shared ILS is crucial to realizing the full benefits of integration. However, the target date for a 2CUL migration to a shared system has been twice postponed, first from July 2015 to July 2016, then from July 2016 to July 2017.
4. Personnel turnover and slow response from university offices added significant delays in obtaining legal approval for establishing a formal governance board for 2CUL, developing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the project, and advancing important negotiations. These delays have undermined clarity and inhibited risk taking and experimentation for TSI.

The fundamental hypothesis for TSI was that "to move from the exploratory to the implementation stage of 2CUL, it will be necessary to unify Columbia and Cornell technical services as much as possible, while retaining those local practices and workflows that must remain institution-specific."⁷ In reality, significant barriers towards unification had begun to appear. Why did this happen?

Aspirations for TSI may have been too lofty or even premature, especially given the complex legal, financial, and labor issues that the libraries

have had to address during the relatively short period of the Mellon grant. As Stephen Abram counseled in an interview with *Collaborative Librarianship* in 2009: "Invest most of your project time in planning, not implementing. Your ability to achieve corrections in your course declines precipitously after you officially start the collaboration. So you should plan, forecast, schedule, and then start."⁸ The BookOps initiative, for example, has in great part succeeded because its formal joint governance structure was firmly in place before the tactical and operational aspects of integration took place.⁹ As an example in contrast, TSI planners wanted to take advantage of a staff vacancy in the winter of 2014 to share the high-level ordering expertise of a single librarian for both institutions. Without a formal 2CUL MOU in place to address issues pertinent to establishing this kind of advisory, though non-supervisory role, this innovative idea had to be scrapped. Legal and bureaucratic delays in putting the higher-level infrastructure in place to support even this incremental step towards integration were heavy blows to morale. In hindsight, however, the idea to share expertise in this way may simply have been an attempt to do too much too soon. The tactical and strategic elements of the integration were out of sync. The urge to accelerate integration bumped up against the universities' need to manage institutional risks, which required 2CUL leadership to adopt a more deliberate pace to build a solid strategic framework for the project, with a carefully planned governance structure. Further, the repeated delays in moving towards a shared ILS would have made the job of this 2CUL ordering librarian more challenging in any case. As Miles, Miles, and Snow warn: "Collaboration is a complex, potentially fragile process, and it cannot be easily accelerated. The temptation ... will be to cut corners if possible and to lock in whatever appears to work – without much reflection."¹⁰

Another possible factor behind this disharmony was a lag in the cultural aspects of the TSI venture. Abram maintains that collaborators should: "Never, ever, underestimate culture. Culture trumps everything. You must align with cultural values. If you attack them, you make them stronger and change won't happen. The people inside the organization own the culture,

not the organization. They have all the power, and if you forget that, you will fail.”¹¹ Although planning for TSI is built on openness and transparency, and each institution had made good faith efforts to involve and inform staff, integration has not seemed real to most staff since there has been little progress to demonstrate or experience first-hand. Miles, Miles, and Snow stress the importance of active engagement, saying that “as with any behavior, collaboration can be taught and learned, and thus over time it can diffuse throughout a society to the point where it becomes a meta-capability. A meta-capability is an abundant social asset, [but] until a particular social asset becomes widely available, organizations cannot tap into it to operate their business strategies.”¹² Michael Ridley also explores this notion of collaboration as learned behavior and uses a more visceral metaphor to describe this factor: “Collaboration is a muscle; the more it is used, the stronger it gets. Conversely, neglect a collaborative initiative and it will atrophy.”¹³ Extending this metaphor still further, it could be said that if the collaborative “body” attempts to do too much too soon, it will buckle or even break.

At the end of Phase 1, TSI planners envisioned a soft integration taking place over 18 months during which the functional working groups would continue to learn about each other’s operations, evaluate and test shared workflows, and actively look for ways to expand the 2CUL vision. It became clear, however, that even incremental steps can reach a point where progress must halt until other components of the collaborative enterprise – strategic, tactical, operational, interpersonal, and cultural – are in alignment.¹⁴ While all five of these levels must be achieved, TSI planners are learning first-hand that the ways in which these components are related is of equal importance. Of particular relevance to the 2CUL environment is timing: strategic, tactical, and cultural aspects need to be in sync. Whenever they are not, it is critical to step back and adjust the pace of tactical integration – that is, the planning required to effect the kind of deep operational collaboration envisioned for 2CUL.

Having realized that the initial hypothesis for TSI did not match the reality of the conditions

governing the project, the question became: what *would* work? How do we pivot? Was there a substantive change we could make to one or [f](#) more aspects of the model to revitalize the project, or was the very essence of TSI at stake?

From Integration to Initiative

As the obstacles to actual integration began to mount in early 2014, the original vision for TSI Phase 2 began to erode. This problem became apparent in a staff survey designed to establish a baseline to benchmark progress towards the goals of TSI and to measure changes over time in staff perceptions, as well as the impact of the new collaborative model on staff engagement. The results were sobering. On average, respondents believed that 2CUL TSI would have a negative impact in all the areas surveyed, but especially on efficiency, communication, and decision-making. On further consideration, however, these results were not surprising. Columbia and Cornell had been talking about (and talking up) TSI for more than a year, with little to show for this effort except for a substantial collection of meeting minutes and reports. Furthermore, a number of these reports chronicled repeated delays in the completion of the 2CUL MOU (on which many of the guidelines for cross-institutional TSI work depended) and in negotiations for a joint ILS (which could not proceed further without an MOU in place). The public timetable for TSI had clearly become out of sync with the pace of the institutional bureaucracy required to support the effort, at least as far the project was initially envisioned.

Following a face-to-face meeting of the TSI Administrative Team at Cornell in May and a strategically critical JSMIN session in early June, TSI planners agreed to reconceive the goals of the project (i.e., to “fire the model”) and articulate a new set of hypotheses that would better correspond to the institutional realities they were facing. With the approval of both library administrations, JSMIN announced the following action plan for the TSI Phase 2 pivot:

1. Change the terms of TSI from a 2CUL Technical Services *Integration* to a 2CUL Technical Services *Initiative*;

2. Focus on more discrete, promising collaborative projects and alliances, and determine the relative value of such collaboration on the basis of four driving factors that originally fueled the 2CUL project: quality, productivity, improvement, and innovation;
3. Test and assess collaborative efforts based on the criteria defined above and for their strategic value in addressing the priorities of the individual institutions;
4. Continue the middle-out approach to TSI planning to leverage the experience and expertise of staff at all levels, as well as engaging and building support among key mid-level staff who will ultimately need to carry the initiative(s) forward;
5. Continue to build on the excellent contributions of the TSI Working Groups in Phase 1 of the project (information-gathering) by examining more deeply the differences in 2CUL institutional culture and practices, and the reasons for them;
6. Pursue additional research into the broader landscape of collaboration among libraries in order to better situate the 2CUL TSI experience within this trend and to share what we are learning with other ARL libraries;
7. Participate in discussions on implementation strategy and timing for a joint ILS;
8. Rekindle the positive energy of TSI; build and maintain the Technical Services Initiative from the ground up, while leading from the middle out.¹⁵

While this reconfiguring of the planning model for 2CUL TSI represented a significant adjustment of expectations for the project, it is also decoupled to a great extent the immediate goals of the initiative from the restrictions and delays posed by the unfinished 2CUL MOU and the postponement of negotiations for a shared ILS.

With a rekindled sense of purpose, the TSI E-Resources Working Group completed a migration of Cornell's electronic resource management data to ProQuest's 360 Resource Manager system in late summer 2014, a product that Co-

lumbia had been using for quite some time already. This agreement to use the same e-resource management (ERM) system was achieved without a formal MOU or statement of work. Nor did it require a formal administrative integration of staff. Cornell simply discontinued its contract with its previous ERM vendor and signed up for the ProQuest product; Columbia pledged (and delivered) staff support to help with the data migration. The two libraries now use the same ERM, as well as the same link resolver (ProQuest 360 Link), an operational agreement that opens the way to potentially productive collaboration, such as: joint troubleshooting of e-resource access problems; joint management of shared data and contacts; integrated workflows for account management, including work on renewals; and coordination of renewal cycles to allow more opportunities to eliminate redundant work. The two libraries had already initiated joint negotiations, as 2CUL, for certain e-resource packages and had begun to realize savings in their collections budget, even before their decision to coordinate ERM activities. It is important to understand that these steps towards increased collaboration were not solely the result of an administrative decree to integrate technical services, but the outcome of several months of TSI staff working together to understand each other's operations and a willingness to explore areas in which the two institutions might realize qualitative and productive gains through improved workflows and collaborative innovation. Thus, the original intention to integrate, though in retrospect overly ambitious, led to broad-scale planning in the first year of the project – planning that involved representatives from every functional unit in 2CUL technical services – which consequently sowed the seeds for the kind of smaller-scale, though nonetheless strategically motivated reconception of TSI that characterized the project's pivot.

Although the progress of the E-Resources Working Group towards more integrated e-resource management represents the most noteworthy advance in the second year of TSI, the lower impact approach that some of the other working groups have adopted, in the absence of shared systems, is reaping smaller, but still meaningful benefits for the two institutions as well. The

Batch Processing Working Group meets regularly by phone to investigate ways to diminish IT workloads and to share data and expertise. The TSI Cataloging Working Group is coordinating joint 2CUL participation in national initiatives – such as the use of the Faceted Application of Subject Terminology (FAST), BIBFRAME training and testing (for which 2CUL cooperation has led to a significant reduction in training costs), and contributions to the Contemporary Composers Web Archive – as well as sharing expertise in such languages as Georgian and Thai. The TSI Non-MARC Metadata Working Group now coordinates metadata forums at the two institutions and invites 2CUL participation from both libraries in most sessions via WebEx. The group also invites individuals from the partnering institution to participate in person in select local forums. Finally, as a first step in “examining more deeply the differences in 2CUL institutional culture and practices, and the reasons for them,” the TSI Managers are working with the leads of the Print Serials Working Group to conduct in-depth reviews of print serials management workflows at both institutions. TSI planners hope that this study will not only reveal the roots and ramifications of what seem to be significant differences in practice at Columbia (where print serials processing is chiefly decentralized) and at Cornell (where processing is mostly centralized) but to establish a methodology for further such investigations, within 2CUL technical services and beyond.

How do these “substantive changes to one or more components” of the initial model for TSI correct the flawed hypothesis inherent in the original vision for the project? First of all, by shifting their focus from the integration of nearly 150 staff at two large university libraries (one of which operates with the support of a significant number of unionized staff, while the other does not) to more immediately realizable action on discrete initiatives that promise quality, productivity, improvement, and/or innovation, TSI planners have been able to redirect their time and energy to fostering what Ridley calls the “art of the possible.”¹⁶ Freed from the mandate to create an administrative and cultural infrastructure to support an integrated technical services operation – an infrastructure that hinges on the legal and bureaucratic will of two large,

complex, and administratively different institutions to support the agile innovations required to make integration of these two operations work – TSI planners aimed to reconceive the collaborative process as an inductive enterprise, building a flexible infrastructure based on the success of discrete projects and loose developmental alliances, initiatives that are possible, not merely aspirational.¹⁷ Second, this adjustment in approach reinforces one of the project team’s original caveats for TSI – and, in fact, for 2CUL as a whole: “just because it’s 2CUL doesn’t necessarily mean it’s good.”¹⁸ This working maxim extends a principle first intoned in the very title of a formative paper on 2CUL by Columbia’s former Vice President for Information Services & University Librarian, James G. Neal: “Advancing from Kumbaya to Radical Collaboration.”¹⁹ Kumbaya, even within an initiative predefined as “radical collaboration,” is not enough. In the words of Morten T. Hansen, management professor at the University of California, Berkeley’s School of Information, “the goal of collaboration is not collaboration, but better results ... [C]ollaboration is a means to an end, and that end is great performance.”²⁰ What Hansen advocates is “disciplined collaboration”: the “leadership practice of properly assessing when to collaborate (and when not to) and instilling in people both the willingness and the ability to collaborate when required.”²¹ Third, this “instilling” to which Hansen refers is a cultural consideration, which echoes the notion of “meta-capability” set forth by Miles, Miles, and Snow: a powerful resource which, however, requires time to develop before the two libraries can reliably “tap into it to operate their business strategies.” And while 2CUL TSI has not yet had sufficient opportunity to develop fully its collaborative muscle (to re-invoke Ridley’s image), the efforts of the functional working groups in TSI Phase 1 constitute a formidable training base for more substantive collaborative work, especially once 2CUL decides that the time is right for implementation of a shared ILS.

Next Steps (After the Pivot)

There is no doubt that the future of research libraries, and possibly the future of libraries in general, will rely on greater collaboration than we have thus far seen. As Neal maintains, “The



future health of the research library will be increasingly defined by new and energetic relationships and combinations, and the radicalization of working relationships among research libraries, between libraries and the communities they serve, and in new entrepreneurial partnerships.”²² Paula T. Kaufman, writing a short time later, concurs that “never before has the imperative to cooperate and collaborate been so clear and so urgent. With the insufficiency that derives from declining resources, plunging buying power, and the enormous pressures to do more and more and more ... comes the imperative to create new types of collaborations.”²³ Clearly, a number of libraries have taken this bit between their teeth and have engaged, or begun to engage, in collaborative ventures that go beyond traditional consortial models. 2CUL TSI is unique, however, in that its two large research libraries, located over 200 miles apart, are aiming to leverage the talent and scope of their technical services staff without disbanding operations at either library, without consolidating the operations financially, without formal “integration” of staff and, at least for the near future, without a shared ILS. In spite of what TSI leaders have learned, and continue to learn, from other collaborations, the project is still fundamentally idiosyncratic in its aims and scope.

In the third year of the Mellon-funded project (2015), TSI planners will need to mainstream the activities cited earlier in this essay, especially the collaborative work of the E-Resources Working Group and its associated processing units at both libraries. It is this team that has taken the greatest steps towards mutual, routine cost reductions, the minimization of redundant operations, and the meta-capabilities envisioned for TSI, even without formal integration.²⁴ The Cataloging and Non-MARC Metadata Working Groups are leveraging the already considerable scope of the two technical services operations, an effort that promises improved user service over time, though one that is less likely to generate ongoing cost savings and significant elimination of redundant labor. Productive collaboration in other areas, such as joint batch processing of acquisitions and catalog data and the integration of print ordering operations – functions that originally seemed to hold much promise for TSI – will proceed more slowly, unless

and until 2CUL adopts a shared ILS. TSI directors must also execute a transition from the leadership structure designed to support TSI through the grant-funded planning period to one that can best sustain the initiative beyond 2015.

In fall 2014, members of the TSI JSMIN group remarked that since the project’s change of direction several weeks earlier, TSI activities had become more “natural,” “not as forced.” Even with the de-prioritization of the goal to integrate, TSI was “getting [us] in the habit of thinking beyond ourselves,” and “see[ing] others as a sounding board.”²⁵ This perspective was affirmed a short time later in a discussion with the TSI working group leads, who maintained that the project has started to feel “organic” in several functional areas and that this “comfortable interpersonal climate should serve us well if and when we implement an ILS together.” Further, the group concluded, “without the mandate to integrate, TSI seems less forced.”²⁶ It remains to be seen, of course, how successful TSI will eventually be. It is important to note, however, that the middle-out approach to implementing TSI, adopted by project planners from the initiative’s inception, has permitted the team to pivot smoothly in the wake of the demoralizing realization that actual integration of 2CUL technical services would not be possible – an otherwise lethal blow to the original plan. Middle-out leadership for the project also continues to ensure the implementation of those collaborative practices that are “natural” and have the greatest chance of yielding the kind of operational advantages that TSI – and 2CUL as a whole – are designed to achieve, while remaining open to taking risks, committed to testing and assessment, and alert to opportunities for joint investigation of mutual problems. While more deliberate and conservative than its initial vision to unify 2CUL technical services in their entirety, the new direction for TSI allows additional time to construct a stronger strategic and formal framework for 2CUL at higher levels of library administration, while nurturing the growth of the cultural alliance, including its meta-capabilities, within 2CUL technical services, building on natural affinities and increasing trust and respect among staff.²⁷ In this way, the Technical Services *Initiative* will better position

the Columbia and Cornell University Libraries for an eventual migration to a shared ILS, following which further anticipated dividends from the alliance are more likely to materialize. It will also preserve the flexibility of the two *separate* technical services divisions to pivot smoothly, should our revised hypothesis for TSI prove once again inadequate.

Blank maintains that an organization should execute a pivot in a manner that is “constant, consistent, and relentless,” but that the pace of this strategic turn is achievable only if one develops the product “iteratively and incrementally.”²⁸ While the libraries’ initial enthusiasm for TSI may have lost some of its vigor in the second year of its three-year planning period, the project’s pivot, by slowing the pace of the work, recalibrating hypotheses to match reality, and embracing “the possible,” aims to better position project participants to reframe their institutions’ aspirations for a collaborative alliance that has never been “so clear and so urgent,” a venture on which the “future health of the research library will be increasingly defined.” The goals of 2CUL TSI are still evolving, even after its reconception from integration to initiative. At the heart of this evolution – if 2CUL TSI is to achieve long-term success – will be a shared culture of flexibility, innovation, and a will to collaborate that is “constant, consistent, and relentless,” while developing “iteratively and incrementally.” To paraphrase the conclusion from our initial report on this initiative: 2CUL must become, at its heart, a state of mind.

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Endnotes

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- ⁹ Charlene Rue, phone call with authors, August 26, 2014. BookOps is the consolidated technical services operation that serves both the Brooklyn Public Library and the New York Public Library.
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- ²⁴ Interestingly, Rick Lugg, Partner at R2 Consulting, speculated five years ago that “e-resources management: knowledgebase and proxy server updates, cataloging, link maintenance, implementation of ERMS modules, etc.” would be the area of technical services with the greatest potential for successful collaboration. See: Rick Lugg, Cory Tucker, and Chris Signet, “Library Collaboration and the Changing Environment: An Interview with Rick Lugg, R2 Consulting,” *Collaborative Librarianship* 2:1 (January 2010), 19.
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- ²⁸ Blank, “Steve Blank on the Pivot.”