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Executive Director Report, February 2026

Provides leadership in ensuring sustainable, equitable resource sharing

Federal Funding and IMLS Update

On February 3, President Trump signed a budget that funds most government services through FY2026, which [includes almost level funding for IMLS](#). Congress passed a \$1.4 million increase for library programs run by the IMLS through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) which brings LSTA funding to \$212.5 million for FY2026. Level funding was also included for the school library focused program, Innovative Approaches to Literacy (IAL) at \$30 million. ALA reports that this is certainly in part due to the tremendous advocacy of library supporters across the nation in the face of IMLS elimination and cuts.

Not all of the news is positive this month. The Institute of Museum and Library Services saw a reduction in funds, largely because of elimination of some staff at IMLS. A smaller IMLS staff will administer grant funding operations. ProPublica also recently [reported](#) on the changes in funding guidelines for IMLS grants that includes “unusually specific criteria”.

On February 10, the American Library Association (ALA) and the Trump administration jointly moved to [extend the briefing schedule](#) while they engage in settlement negotiation. This is the second extension in six months. ALA’s joint response is now due April 20 and the DOJ will have until May 4 to file a reply.

ALA National Library Legislative Day, Feb 25-26

I will be attending the American Library Association’s National Library Legislative Day in Washington DC on February 25-26 as part of the Illinois contingent. RAILS Board member Emily Porter will also attend. I am serving as Illinois state captain and currently have four meetings scheduled with federal legislators serving Illinois. I hope to report back on the experience at our February meeting.

Illinois Legislative Updates

I attended the Illinois Library Association (ILA) Public Policy Committee (PPC) meeting as Ex Officio on Monday, February 2. As you know, the ILA Executive Board has approved the following legislative priorities for this year:

- Increase Library System Area & Per Capita Grants and Public Per Capita & School District Grants by 20%
- Require Public Library Trustee Training
- Open Educational Resources funding grant
- Making eBooks Equitable and Accessible

Some new bills related to these priorities have begun to appear:

[HB4261](#) would increase annual grants for public libraries in the state, school library grants, and the library system grants by 20% in order to reflect inflationary pressures since the last time the grant amount was raised. The library system grant is what funds operations at RAILS and the other two systems in Illinois. The bill, which was filed by Rep. Martha Deuter, has bipartisan support with ten additional cosponsors as of the time of this writing. If passed, this bill would be effective immediately.

[HB3411](#) would appropriate \$3,000,000 from the General Revenue Fund to the Secretary of State for a recurring, permanent grant program for Illinois academic libraries. The grant would be applied to Open Educational Resources. This bill was filed by Rep Normal Hernandez and has five co-sponsors.

[HB5236](#) (filed by Rep. Tracy Katz Muhl) and [HB5279](#) (filed by Rep Nabeel Syed) would amend the Digital Library Protection Act to include more reasonable terms for libraries as it relates to eBook licenses. These provisions closely reflect those made in the [2025 legislation](#) passed in Connecticut. RAILS staff Anna Behm, Leila Heath, and myself have worked closely with the eBook subcommittee of the ILA Public Policy Committee in order to address strategies and progress related to the support of better eBook terms for libraries.

We expect many more bills to follow to be shared at the ILA Public Policy Committee meeting on Monday, March 2.

Strategic Planning 2027-2029

RAILS has completed the formation of its Strategic Plan Steering Committee. The committee consists of 13 participants, including RAILS staff, board members, and staff from member libraries representing a range of library sizes, types, geographic areas, and positions to ensure broad and balanced input. The committee will work closely with consultant Cindy Fesemeyer to provide insight and perspective in support of key strategic planning activities. The first meeting of the Steering Committee is expected to take place in March 2026. We are also hard at work on the initial survey for members and for staff, and we expect to see those surveys released in March.

Models best practices in equity, diversity, accessibility, and inclusion

Freedom Lifted

RAILS offers an asynchronous model for learning related to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion for ourselves and our member libraries. [Freedom Lifted](#) is a blend of asynchronous EDI training and learning opportunities available to staff and trustees of RAILS member libraries and relevant to all library types. It is accessible through September 15, 2026.

RAILS assists member libraries in preparing for the future

Find More Illinois Innovation

RAILS has engaged in preliminary conversations with neighboring states, particularly Wisconsin, about expanding interstate resource sharing through Find More Illinois and related statewide lending programs. Wisconsin's use of the same Autographics software (SHAREit) would make integration relatively seamless. While delivery logistics would need to remain within Illinois borders or operate on a cost-recovery basis, Wisconsin's existing cross-border sharing with

Minnesota (Minitex) presents promising opportunities for broader regional collaboration. This also aligns with ongoing ISLAC conversations regarding statewide resource sharing possibilities.

Leads alongside member libraries to develop and strengthen Illinois library community

New Advocacy Tools for eBooks and Audiobooks

On January 30, RAILS launched new [e-book and audiobook advocacy tools](#) to help share awareness of the challenges of the current licensing models for libraries related to ebooks and audiobooks. The graphics included were originally created to highlight the issues for the Illinois Library Association's Legislative meetups and were created by RAILS staff Anna Behm and Ola Gronski. The new downloadable tool can be shared across all social media platforms and includes a Canva template that allows libraries and library organizations to personalize the graphics with their own logos. Media coverage of these tools from ALA Direct and Words & Money also brought national attention to RAILS and this issue in the library community this month. We are thrilled to share this work with our colleagues across the country.

ICOLC Conference in Orlando March 15-18

I will attend the ICOLC (International Coalition of Library Consortia) Annual conference in Orlando from March 15-18. I will be presenting on a panel about continuing education offerings in multitype library environments while I am there.

Libraries of Illinois Risk Agency (LIRA) Executive Committee

I was recently reelected as Treasurer of the [Libraries of Illinois Risk Agency](#) (LIRA) which is a property, casualty, and workers compensation insurance cooperative open to Illinois libraries. LIRA continues to serve its members through financial savings on comprehensive service, and I am happy to continue serving in this capacity to the group.

Dolly Parton Imagination Library

RAILS Associate Executive Director Joe Filapek and I met with a representative of the Dolly Parton Imagination Library this month. This program has now expanded to 90 of 102 counties and they are looking to expand for full coverage in Illinois. In the RAILS service area, community partners are still needed in Rock Island county, as well as to expand coverage in DuPage and Cook counties. More information is available at: <https://imaginationlibrary.com/illinois/>

Looking Ahead to March

- **March Service of the Month and Board Development topics – eRead Illinois and Inkie.org with Anna Behm and an overview of rural public libraries with Beth Duttlinger**



This Month at RAILS – February 2026

THE TOP THREE

In response to board member feedback, each month we provide brief talking points to help you spread the word about specific RAILS programs/services. Here are this month's top three:

RAILS Creates Cook County Library Taxing Infographic

In response to discussions with affected RAILS member libraries around delayed tax funding from Cook County, RAILS Digital Marketing & Communications Specialist Ola Gronski and Data Analyst Janette Derucki created an [infographic document](#) explaining the issue's impact on public libraries. The document explains how different types of public libraries are categorized (and prioritized) for emergency disbursements, as well as the number of suburban Cook County residents affected by this issue. This document has been shared with Cook County staff to better explain how Cook County public libraries are impacted by these delays.

RAILS Offers New L2 Onboarding Handout

RAILS created an [L2 onboarding handout](#) to help any library type acquaint staff with the Library Directory & Learning Calendar platform and the benefits of creating an account. Those with an L2 account can register for webinars and networking events, find colleagues at other libraries, view delivery information, and much, much more.

Deals Email List Launch

The Deals & Discounts team launched email lists for public and K–12 libraries in January to provide RAILS members with updates about new and interesting RAILS deals and discounts for electronic resources, materials, supplies, and furniture. These email list subscribers will also have opportunities to suggest products, give input on services, ask questions, and connect with peers. The Deals email list for public libraries already has over 100 subscribers, and the K-12 email list has over a dozen.

Provides leadership in ensuring sustainable, equitable resource sharing

Enhance sharing of knowledge and best practices

January RAILS Site Visits

RAILS Member Engagement Manager Jessica Silva visited Lake Forest Academy on Thursday, January 8, with their two LFA librarians on a new member visit. They chatted about the RAILS resources that they can take advantage of, and they are also going to share information about RAILS with their independent-schools network.

To learn more about these visits, see our site visit map, or to request a visit, please visit the [RAILS Library Site Visits](#) page.

Jessica Silva and Janette Derucki at Virtual Town Hall for School Libraries

Jessica Silva presented alongside RAILS Data Analyst Janette Derucki and IHLS Director of Membership & Outreach Leah Gregory for the Virtual School Town Hall on January 20. There were 70 attendees, and they shared information about advocacy for school librarians and resources available for Illinois library staff.

RAILS Hosted My Library Is... Grant Cowork Time

On Wednesday, January 14, Jessica Silva hosted a My Library Is... Grant virtual cowork session for 12 attendees from various libraries and various library types. They discussed grant projects and the rubric. Members connected to peer review at later dates.

Amanda Jones Joins as Guest on *Can't Shelve This* Podcast

In "Sitting Down with That Librarian," school librarian, author, and activist Amanda Jones joins the show to share her story in a candid conversation about censorship, courage, and hope for the future of libraries. Available on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you get your podcasts.

RAILS Social Media Engagement

See the report at the end for info on our January social media engagement efforts.

Leverage economies of scale to provide greater purchasing power

RAILS members can find information, trial access, and pricing on all deals and discounts by logging into the [RAILS Deals & Discounts](#) page.

2025 Year in Review Stats

- 421 participating libraries (108 schools, 313 public), 8.5% increase from 2024
- 1,892 total subscriptions managed, 5% increase from 2024
- 160+ products offered, 14% increase from 2024
- 50+ vendor partnerships, 28% increase from 2024
- \$2.5 million+ in total savings for libraries, 19% increase from 2024



EBSCO Supplemental Packages and Resources

Signup and renewal are now open for the 2026 EBSCO discounted packages and resources to supplement the free Illinois State Library Statewide E-Resource Package. The RAILS group purchase deal runs July 1–July 30 and is available to both school and public libraries.

With 155 libraries participating and nearly \$2 million in savings for RAILS libraries, this is one of the most popular and active deals that the RAILS Deals & Discount team manages, so planning starts early! This year, new offerings include Learn with NoveList Plus and “Ultimate” upgrades included in the Package offerings, which provide up to double the amount of content to the Premier or Complete versions of the same resources.

Playgarden

Playgarden Online is the newest group purchase opportunity from RAILS Deals & Discounts. Playgarden Online delivers a full preschool curriculum built by certified educators and filmed in real classrooms. Families can use Playgarden as a complete homeschool preschool program or as a flexible supplement, with access to on-demand lessons and live, teacher-led classes. Libraries can also integrate the platform and live classes into in-person or virtual programming. Libraries have the option to subscribe to on-demand curriculum or upgrade to also offer live classes. Subscriptions include interactive videos, guided worksheets, and activities.

Vendor Webinars

Webinar Title	Date	Registered	Attended
Ask Mackin: A Demo & Q&A	1/6/2026	15	6
Expanding Early Learning and Wellness Access with Hiveclass and Playgarden	1/27/2026	32	14
ReadSquared Reading Programs for Public Libraries	2/5/2026	8	3
Totals		55	23

Online High School Programs

RAILS offers two online high school programs for libraries: Career Online High School (implemented Spring 2016) and Gale Excel (implemented Spring 2024). Stats for both programs are listed below:

Career Online High School Stats as of January 31, 2026

Scholarships Awarded	Total Graduates	Current Number of Students in Program	RAILS Graduation Rate/National Rate
521	286	61	63%/53%

Gale Excel Stats as of January 31, 2026

Scholarships Awarded	Total Graduates	Current Number of Students in Program	RAILS Graduation Rate/National Rate
73	35	35	92%/53%

RAILS Delivery GPS Tracking

RAILS Delivery is in the process of upgrading our fleet with new Verizon GPS tracking devices. These units will replace the current T-Mobile/GeoTab trackers. Over time, the reliability of the T-Mobile service has declined, making the transition necessary. The Verizon GPS tracking devices offer features very similar to our existing system. In addition, this change will provide a cost savings of \$4.00 per device per month, resulting in an annual savings of approximately \$1,920. The Verizon platform will continue to provide similar reporting capabilities, including real-time vehicle location tracking, monitoring excessive driving speeds, maintenance codes and faults, and the ability to group vehicles by delivery hub.

Work collaboratively to identify and support shared catalog solutions and expand resource sharing

Find More Illinois Update

On January 14, Eric Bain and Barb Miller met with Auto-Graphics to discuss outstanding help desk tickets and other issues related to FMI and attended a web-based seminar on SHAREit software.



Leila Heath and Barb Miller met with the director and staff of Des Plaines Public Library on January 16 and Ela Area Public Library District on January 29, to discuss their impressions and experiences with FMI. Their feedback provided valuable insights as we continue to build the statewide program.

Leila Heath and Monica Harris met with the CCS Executive leadership on January 26 to discuss progress, insights, and concerns related to their LLSAP group participation in Find More Illinois.

Leila Heath and Barb Miller met with RAILS Communications Director Dan Bostrom in January to discuss the rebranding process for Find More Illinois. The rebrand, including an updated logo, is expected to be completed by the end of this fiscal year.

Libraries Participating in Find More Illinois as of January 31, 2026

Academic	Public	School	Specialized	Total
9	71	12	1	93

Find More Illinois total transactions (loans and borrows)

Time Period	Number of transactions
January 2026	1,698
Fiscal Year to Date	9,740

Find More Illinois catalog

Time Period	Number of items in shared catalog
January 2026	9,011,931

Find More Illinois Demos/Reviews/Trainings

Date of Training	Library	Number of Participants
January 7 Training	Bradley University (refresher)	3
January 9 Training	McHenry County College	4
January 22 Training	Canton SD 66	1
January 23 Training	Richard A. Mautino PL	1

eRead Illinois-The Palace Project Update

Phase one of school library onboarding to The Palace Project took place in the third week of January. For this phase, The Palace Project deployed three instances in the app – one for eRead elementary schools, one for eRead middle schools, and one for eRead high schools. Every school library in eRead Illinois was given access to the eRead Illinois collection via one of these instances. Phase two of school library onboarding will start in the coming weeks and will involve deploying individual instances for all 550+ school libraries in eRead Illinois.



Anna Behm and Gates Marquez began reaching out to eRead Illinois school library members who cannot access the eRead Illinois collection via an app to discuss options and next steps. They will gather more information from those libraries in February. As of February 5, seven school libraries have scheduled one-on-one meetings with the eRead Illinois team in the coming weeks.

Leila Heath and Anna Behm met regularly with the team from Palace Project to discuss progress with the eRead Illinois transition.

eRead Illinois-The Palace Project Checkouts

Time Period	E-Books	Audiobooks	Total
January 2026	7,470	8,614	16,084
Fiscal Year to Date	97,680	100,581	195,261
Since migration to The Palace Project	14,805	15,739	30,544

The Palace Project Training Webinars

Webinar	Date	Number of attendees
Palace Project Overview	1/13/26	28
Palace Project Q&A	1/21/26	22
Palace Project Q&A for School Libraries	1/29/26	26

The recordings were emailed to registrants and are available on the eRead website.

Inkie.org Library Views

Time Period	Number of Views
January 2026	1,432
Fiscal Year to Date	11,537

Explore More Illinois Update

In January 2026, 2,780 reservations were made in Explore More Illinois. The most popular downstate and suburban attractions in January were DuPage Children’s Museum in Naperville (90), Chicago Children’s Museum in Chicago (57), Griffin Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago (51), Volo Museum in Volo (31), and The Morton Arboretum in Lisle (31). The most popular Chicago attractions in January were the Art Institute of Chicago (600), Griffin Museum of Science and Industry (440), Field Museum (424), Chicago Academy of Science Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum (265), and Chicago Children’s Museum (157).



In January, Explore More Illinois welcomed the Studebaker Theater’s production of Roald Dahl’s The Enormous Crocodile.

Libraries Enrolled in Explore More Illinois as of January 31, 2026

System	Publics	Community Colleges	Total
RAILS	351	3	354
IHLS	110	1	111
CPL	1	n/a	1
Totals	462	4	466

Attractions in Explore More Illinois as of January 31, 2026

Attractions	62
Total Attractions in 2025	82

Reservations Made in Explore More Illinois in January 2026

RAILS/IHLS	458
CPL	2,322
Total	2,780

RAILS Issues Mini Digital Navigator Grants

We issued the first wave of funding through our Cook County Digital Navigator Network partnership in February, with a [“Mini-Pilot” program](#) for libraries serving areas that are below average in key equity measures related to funding, technology availability, and underserved populations. Twenty-three of 31 eligible libraries submitted proposals and are receiving \$2,695 each to complete short-term projects related to technology access and skill development. This initial infusion of funds aims to begin supporting library capacity where it’s most needed and serves as a prototype and learning opportunity in our human-centered design process for the larger grant program to be launched later in 2026. Anne Slaughter and Jessica Silva hosted a co-working and information session for this program in late January with 22 attendees, including several members of our Guiding Team of library staff who provided feedback and mentorship to the recipient libraries.

Assist member libraries in preparing for the future

Future-focused professional development and member engagement efforts

January CE Highlights

RAILS was lucky to host Dr. Brandy McNeil on the topic of AI Policies. As President of the Public Library Association and Deputy Director of Branch Programs and Services at the New York Public Library, Dr. McNeil has designed and scaled initiatives that bridge the digital divide for millions and spearheaded pioneering partnerships with tech giants like Apple, Microsoft, and Google. From one attendee: "This was a fantastic session! Knowing all the things we need to know about AI feels so overwhelming, but this session was clear, pertinent to libraries, and easily understood. I am already working on incorporating something about AI-generated books in our collection development policy (due for review this month already). This was the best AI session I have attended (from multiple sources) so far. Thank you!!"

Facilitates Training Exploration Event

CE & Consulting Specialist Diana Rusch facilitated “Showcase Your Value” on January 21. This virtual event for ALA’s Online Learning Roundtable was part of its Training Exploration series and focused on transferable skills and workforce connections.

Recent CE Events

- **RAILS Catalyst Session #3**, online meeting, January 13
- **“2026 IPLAR Updates and Reporting Guidance,”** webinar, January 27, and at RAILS Burr Ridge, on February 9
- **“Path to Leadership: Detaching from Approval Seeking & Criticism”**, webinar, January 28
- **“Building a Strong Library Volunteer Program,”** webinar, January 30
- **“Document Accessibility Essentials,”** webinar, February 3
- **RAILS Catalyst Session #4**, online meeting, February 10
Participants will continue to learn about Leading Others.
- **“Getting the Most Out of Canva Pro,”** webinar, February 11
- **“Best Children’s Books of 2025”**, webinar, February 19

Upcoming CE Events

- **“Using Storytelling for Advocacy: A Guide for School Librarians”**, webinar, February 23
Leaders from Everyday Advocacy will introduce practical ways that school librarians can strengthen support for their libraries through small, intentional actions built into daily work.
- **“Official RDA: What’s New & Different”**, webinar, February 24
Learn about the most significant new RDA elements and practices, and how to navigate the updated RDA Toolkit.
- **“Creating Your Library’s Culture Statement”**, webinar, March 3
Learn how the Addison Public Library created a meaningful and effective organizational culture statement, and how they defined, wrote, and shared a culture statement that reflects their organization’s values and mission.
- **RAILS Catalyst Online Session #5**, online meeting, March 19
Catalyst participants will begin to learn how to lead across an organization and how to lead effective meetings.
- **“AI Safety Training”**, webinar series, March 11, March 18, and March 25
Learn what AI can do now and what it will likely be able to do in the future, along with key safety precautions. Participants will learn how to use this knowledge to train patrons and colleagues with accurate, reliable information.
- **“Leading Through Change”**, webinar, March 16
HR Source will discuss both the necessary planning to lead successful change and the effective strategies for handling each stage of the change process.

Leads alongside member libraries to develop and strengthen Illinois library community

Strengthen collaborative relationships with partner library organizations

February Partnership Meetings

RAILS has monthly meetings with representatives from the Association of Illinois School Library Educators (AISLE), Chicago Public Schools (CPS), Illinois Heartland Library System (IHLS), Illinois Library Association (ILA), and the Illinois State Library (ISL) to discuss ways we can work collaboratively to support school libraries.

The group met on February 3 and discussed:

- SLATE updates (All)
- Materials challenges (All)
- Legislative updates (ILA)
- ISBE Updates

Anne Slaughter Attended Net Inclusion

Anne Slaughter, RAILS Director of Technology Services, attended Net Inclusion, the annual conference of the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, in Chicago on February 3-5. This year's conference was hosted by our partners at Cook County Digital Equity and is an excellent opportunity to connect and learn with the many library and state library representatives who attend, in addition to groups RAILS is engaged with such as the Schools, Health, and Libraries Broadband Coalition (SHLB), the Illinois Office of Broadband, and the Benton Institute for Internet and Society

Joe Filapek attended the Illinois Association of Park Districts (IAPD) Annual Conference

RAILS Associate Executive Director Joe Filapek attended the IAPD conference on January 29–31 in Chicago. The conference provided an opportunity to participate in sessions on topics relevant to both libraries and park districts, including the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), the Open Meetings Act (OMA), and government finance issues. The conference also offered insight into how another statewide association approaches state-level advocacy. In addition, RAILS viewed the conference as a potential opportunity to build connections that could support and expand partnerships for our Explore More Illinois program.

E-Book Law Meetings

RAILS Executive Director Monica Harris, E-Content Specialist Anna Beam, & Director of Library Resources and Programs Leila Heath attended two e-book law-focused meetings: **The National E-book Law and Policy Meeting** on January 7, and the **E-Book Legislation Working Group** on January 12, 21, and 30. In addition, the RAILS Communications team created a two-page infographic about library e-book pricing for the group that was distributed at ILA legislative meetups this fall.

Anna Behm, Leila Heath, Kortni Springer, Maggie Thomann ELSUM Networking Group, January 29

Deals & Discount team members shared updates with the Electronic Subscription Managers Networking Group about the new Deals email list, Playgarden group purchase, upcoming trial opportunities for Kuzko History and Storykin, and information about July renewals. Anna Behm gave an update about the Palace Project eRead Illinois transition.

Consortia Committee Meeting, January 26, Anna Behm, Leila Heath, Kortni Springer, Maggie Thomann

Anna Behm and Leila Heath, along with Joe Filapek and Monica Harris, gave an update on eRead Illinois transition from Boundless to the Palace Project and answered questions.

Gates Marquez attended IAPD/IPRA: Soaring to New Heights Conference, January 29-31

RAILS Special Projects Librarian Gates Marquez learned more about the landscape for parks departments and districts in Illinois. Several park districts participate as attractions in the Explore More Illinois program. This conference provided significant insights informing a strategy for parks outreach going forward. During this conference, Gates also networked and identified parks contacts for promotion and follow-up about future partnerships with Explore More Illinois.

RAILS IT Update

In January, the RAILS IT Team...

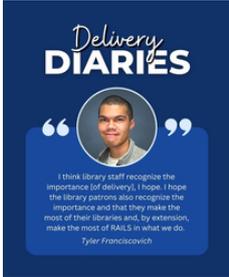
- Finished the laptop Migration for all RAILS Staff
- Finished the installation of new Printers at all RAILS locations.
- Finished this year's E-rate bids and awarded vendors. No changes in services at any of the locations.

RAILS Cataloging Services Assistant

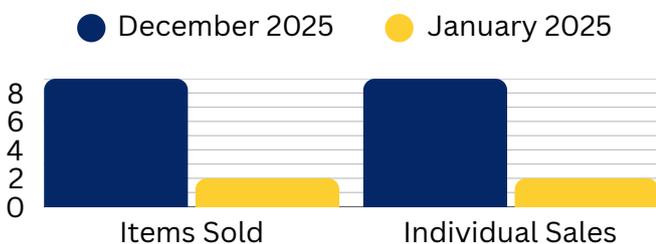
RAILS Cataloging Services Manager Nincy George and Director of Technology Services Anne Slaughter conducted interviews for the open Cataloging Services Assistant position. This position is funded by the World Language Cataloging grant from the Illinois State Library to provide support for the service, which continues to grow.

JANUARY 2026

			
FOLLOWERS <i>total subscribers</i>	Facebook +15 2,928	Instagram +13 1,797	LinkedIn +27 2,330
REACH <i>accounts shown our content</i>	Facebook -7,149 5,289	Instagram -503 1,019	LinkedIn +298 2,338
VIEWS <i>times our content was seen</i>	Facebook -22,495 20,777	Instagram -3,891 5,078	LinkedIn +482 4,618
ENGAGEMENT <i>reactions, comments, and shares</i>	Facebook -958 293	Instagram -194 169	LinkedIn -35 126

TOP POST			
<i>received the most engagement</i>			

 **RAILS Online Store**



 **RAILS Minute Views: 436**

 **Can't Shelve This Listens: 1,628**