Chicago Tribune

DNAinfo was a vital building block for news

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A microphone for DNAinfo appears with other media labels before a City Council committee hearing in December 2014. DNAinfo was an important part of Chicago's media ecosystem. (Brian Cassella / Chicago Tribune)

One afternoon in February 2015, my daughter, then a senior at Chicago's Lane Tech College Prep, came home from school with a hot tip for me: Administrators had just announced to the student body that their principal, Christopher Dignam, was resigning at the end of the year to take a similar position at Deerfield High School.

It wasn't stop-the-presses news, of course. But Lane is a big school — more than 4,000 students — and an institution on the Northwest Side since 1908. Dignam, himself a Lane grad, was young, popular and dynamic. His departure was a real loss to the Chicago Public Schools. I decided to alert our city desk, thinking they might either do a separate story or incorporate the news into other education coverage.

But did he go by Chris or Christopher? Annie knew him only as “Dr. Dignam.” So I Googled his name before composing my note to the editors, and the first hit was a 600-word news story headlined “Lane Tech Principal Resigns, Leaving for Suburban Deerfield.”

D’oh! The indefatigable Patti Wetli, DNAinfo Chicago’s beat reporter for the Northwest Side neighborhoods of Lincoln Square, North Center, Roscoe Village, Irving Park and Albany Park, where I live, was, as usual, all over the story. The facts. An interview with Dignam (who has since been promoted to superintendent of High School District 113). A quote from his new employer. All published before Lane students had arrived home for the day.

Like so many stories that Wetli and her colleagues wrote for the online service, it was fast, accurate and vital, albeit to a smaller population than the population we try to serve at the Tribune. They covered and uncovered hyperlocal news that had been lost as neighborhood newspapers closed or consolidated.

Accordingly, Thursday’s late-afternoon bulletin that ownership had summarily pulled the plug on DNAinfo Chicago, as well as its sister blog Chicagoist and similar sites in four other cities, landed hard.

Relentless, granular coverage of smaller stories ends up shining lights into corners where bigger media outlets seldom look. It not only provides the sort of scrutiny that keeps local politicians and bureaucrats honest, it also keeps citizens engaged with the news and their communities while occasionally providing raw material for bigger stories aimed at bigger audiences.

Publications like DNAinfo Chicago are an important part of the media ecosystem. When they go away, the loss reverberates. Accountability wanes. Ignorance and indifference metastasize. Even those who never looked at hyperlocal news will ultimately feel the impact.