**Thesis tool – market research**

**USAfacts** – a “data driven portrait of the American population, our government’s finances, and government’s impact on society”. Provides databases, all on the national level, from 70+ national government agencies. All public records. They also provide reports, and you’re allowed to interact with the data. It’s a nonprofit, interacting with the data is free – no alert option. You can download the original databases.

**Sqoop** -- allows journalists to receive email alerts when ‘new matching documents’ are published. The data sources they provide are SEC filings, patents, court dockets (from federal district courts, federal bankruptcy courts, courts of federal claims, courts of international trade, and partially circuit courts of appeals), press releases from the DOJ and USAO and ‘business stories’, provided by corporate users of the Sqoop platform. Focuses on business journalists. Sqoop is free for journalists.

**GovTrack** – tracks the US Congress, publishes the status of federal legislation, gives information about your representative and senators. You can track bills and get alerts for members of congress, bills, voting records and committees.

**OpenGov** – cloud based software for public sector budgeting, reporting, and open data. Aims for more transparent and accountable governments. (Palo Alto uses this for instance). They have a product line called ‘Communications and Reporting’. Citizens can make a request for their local or county government to start using the products. Displays spreadsheets about local government budgets, for instance. No alert function.

**OpenElections** – free, comprehensive, standardized, linked set of election data for the United States, including federal and statewide offices. Mainly federal races and major statewide offices. Lets you download CSV and JSON files, as well as XML. Supported by the Knight Foundation. Don’t work in RealTime – are open source on GitHub.

**OpenStates** – track bills, upcoming legislation, and see how your local representatives are voting in your state. Strives to improve civic engagement at the state level by providing data and tools regarding state legislatures. Publish information to the public via the website, API and bulk downloads. Enables individuals to figure out who represents them, look up information on an important bill, discover how representatives are voting, or just stay current with what is happening in their capital. Free of charge, open source. No email alert option.

**MuckRock** – non-profit, collaborative news site that provides a repository of more than a hundred thousand pages of original government materials, information on how to file requests, and tools that make the requesting process easier. Government materials are available free of charge and, with some exceptions, without restrictions. Filing requests starts at $20 to file four requests, which includes advice, postage, follow-up, and hosting of the materials in an easy to use format.

**SearchSystems.net** – organized links to over 70,000 databases by type and location to help you find property, criminal, court, birth, death, marriage, divorce records, licenses, deeds, mortgages, corporate records, business registration, and other public records, free of charge. (In a similar vein: NetR Online)

**Enigma Public** – very large database of public data, free to use by journalists. You can search for topics or datasets, read spotlights on datasets, or browse projects created with public data. No local government, no email alerts.

**Klaxon** – enables reporters and editors to monitor scores of sites and files on the web for newsworthy changes. Get email and Slack notifications when something changes. Klaxon enables users to ‘bookmark’ portions of a webpage and be notified of any changes that may occur. Use Heroku, set it up through a tutorial in GitHub. (In all fairness, it’s quite a project, even though they noted that they want to be easy to use for people without tech experience). Seems like they’re also building something that resembles my idea, but I don’t know how long this message has been here >

*“If you want to track files with Klaxon, you’ll have to set up an account with Amazon Web Services’ Simple Storage Service (S3). If you are tracking a few dozen files on the web that update irregularly, it should cost you pennies each month. (More on this option to come…)”*

The last update to the README file (where this message is posted) was 6 months ago, and was to add a new contributor to the file.

**Analysis**

Most of these tools rely on datasets that are part of the public records, made available by the government. While these tools are definitely useful for reporters – I have used a lot of them myself over the past few months – they are historical rather than future-oriented. That’s not to say that no stories can come out of these public records, because that is definitely possible. But for a local journalist who is on one (or, more realistically, several) beat(s), manually searching through these datasets and databases might not be the easiest way to find new stories, especially since new things are happening all the time.

The tool I have envisioned will be future-oriented, while also giving reporters the options to search the existing archive for historical documents that match they keyword. Nevertheless, the main focus is on providing reporters with timely alerts about topics of their interest that will come up in City Council meetings – and sending them the relevant documents they might want to read. This will enable them to focus on the things that are most important to them, and save them a lot of time in their preparation and selection.

Some of these tools have a more future-oriented vision. Especially Klaxon somewhat resembles the idea that this tool is going for, with some notable differences. First of all, Klaxon lets you track changes to webpages, but will not send you relevant files or let you search for specific keywords. Second, even though they claim they want they tool to be easy to use for people with no coding experience, the GitHub page is still quite a lot to take in. The tool that I want to develop must be as clean and simple as possible, so that even more ‘old fashioned’ or ‘tech averse’ local journalists will want to work with it.

On their GitHub page, Klaxon hints at adding a file tracker utility being added in, but the last update to the file where this was posted is 6 months ago and had nothing to do with that utility. It’s therefore uncertain if the Klaxon team is still working on this feature and what it will look like. It also requires you to set up another account in order to manage the files. My tool will not require end users to sign up for more services than just mine, and will send relevant files to users directly, so that they have the option to download them on their own devices, or on any other platform they use.

**Conclusion**

While there are several tools and companies active in the “open government” sector, there doesn’t seem to be a tool that is actively used or widely known that focuses on local government from a future-oriented “alert” perspective. What’s more, specifically local government seems to be routinely left out of these tools and services, which means there is quite probably a demand gap to fill. If I can successfully launch my tool with the conditions outlined in my original idea document, this could be a huge improvement for local journalists with many responsibilities and little time.