Red Alert: Tools to automatically generate story leads
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RSS Feeds:

Many government and private web sites offer RSS feeds to automatically alert you when they issue reports, press releases, articles, blog items or other posts.   You can view the feeds using a free RSS Reader such as The Old Reader, Blogtrottr, or Feedly.

Example of RSS Feed:
Federal Elections Commission
http://www.fec.gov/rss/RSSFeeds.shtml

Massachusetts State Audits
http://www.mass.gov/auditor/recent-audits.html

Alternatives (email lists, Twitter):
Many government web sites also use mailing lists or other ways to sign up to receive news alerts. It is worth checking to see whether any agencies you care about offer email lists and sign up.

Examples include:
* Boston emergency alerts
  http://www.cityofboston.gov/oem/alertboston.asp
* FDA news
http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/ContactFDA/StayInformed/GetEmailUpdates/ucm2005606.htm

In addition, many government sites are increasingly breaking news on Twitter first, rather than with a traditional press release. The Department of Justice maintains a list of US Attorney Twitter accounts across the country:
https://twitter.com/TheJusticeDept/lists/u-s-attorneys-on-twitter/members

Monitor web sites:
If sites don't offer an RSS feed or email list, you can use a tool to automatically check for updates on the web site. (One caveat: You will likely get alerts even when minor changes are made to web sites -- not just a new info you care about.)

Examples:
- Firefox plugins: SiteDelta & Distill Monitor
- Chrome monitor: Page Monitor
- Several web sites will send email alerts, including: changedetection.com, www.followthatpage.com, and watchthatpage.com

Advanced alert services:
Some web sites allow you create customized alerts when new items are added. Some examples include:
- **SEC filings.** Several sites allow you to receive alerts when companies file new SEC filings that match your criteria, including secfilings.com (free) and Morningstar Document Research ($802/yr.).
- **Election/legislative information**. The Sunlight Foundation has developed some tools to send out alerts on election filings, legislative bills...etc. Check out https://scout.sunlightfoundation.com/ & http://realtime.influenceexplorer.com/alerts/
- **Google Alerts.** You can have Google email links whenever it finds new articles either in its news search or more general newsfeed Web search. You can set the alerts to either alert you "as it happens," once a day or once a week. https://www.google.com/alerts

In-house tools:
Many newsrooms have built their own specialized programs to automatically check web sites and send story tips to reporters, such as:

- The Lens has built a variety of tools to alert reporters (and provide information for its web site) when government agencies add new records to their public databases. For instance, it monitors local government contracts and real estate transactions. vault.thelensnola.org/
- The Boston Globe built a tool that scrapes the state court web site several times a day, checks for new criminal and civil filings, and sends an email to reporters summarizing any new cases
- The Marshall Project built an internal news app called "Klaxon" that automatically checks several web pages, such as the Department of Justice site, for changes .
- The Montreal Gazette uses a tool to send out alerts when readers add data to a Google form (in a crowdsourced project) or their local data portal adds new databases

- The Baltimore Sun used tools to scrape court appeals decisions in Maryland and grab forfeiture items from Justia.com's RSS feeds and post them on Twitter and send alerts to reporters.
- A Propublica reporter scrapes lobbying reports, adds data to a Google spreadsheet and issues news alerts.
- The St. Louis Post-Dispatch built several scrapers to generate story leads. One checks 911 calls every 15 minutes for shootings, suspicious deaths and other high-profile event and emails reports. Another checks Pacer RSS feeds for new filings in specific cases. A third scraper checks a state campaign finance site for donations of $5,000 or more.