

DECEMBER  
2005

# TVB

# TELEVISION™ BROADCAST

TECHNOLOGY INSIGHT FOR THE BOTTOM LINE™ | [www.televisionbroadcast.com](http://www.televisionbroadcast.com)

# Volicon

Eli Warsawski (left),  
Volicon's president and CEO  
and Julius Perl, Volicon's  
director of marketing

## Keeping An Eye On The Competition

Going Tapeless With Volicon's Observer  
Means More Than Just Getting Rid Of Tape

# Keeping An Eye On The Competition

*Going Tapeless With Volicon's Observer Means More Than Just Getting Rid Of Tape*



SCOTT PROPOSKI

## THE BOTTOM LINE

For years, the big push in broadcast and teleproduction was to go tapeless. When organizations went tapeless, they discovered a host of other benefits such as nonlinear access, multiple streams and metadata. But on the other side of the house, tape is still king because it's cheap. Now Volicon's Observer not only replaces the VHS tape, but brings the benefits of computer technology to the front of the house. The ability to email clips and view them online would be expected from any server-based system, but when you add in real-time multi-channel monitoring and the ability to compare ratings between competitors, that's the kind of intelligence that the front office needs. What could you do with this kind of power?

Julius Perl (left), Volicon's director of marketing and Eli Warsawski, Volicon's president and CEO hope to not only eliminate tape in the front office, but to provide the intelligence that stations need to compete effectively.

by James Careless

In news, knowing what the other guy is doing is vital, especially if he's scoring major points in the ratings! That's why CBS News in New York has installed a Volicon Observer system to do the job. Instead of relying on VHS tapes, the Observer is a computer-based solution that records multiple channels digitally with MPEG-4, then makes these channels available to Internet Explorer browsers in real-time.

"Previously, when a request came through for a recorded segment, we would have to

manually find and pull the tape off the shelf, a cumbersome and sometimes unreliable process," said Frank Governale, CBS News's vice president of operations. "Now we can pull live or archived data instantly and share it over the Internet, without even having to leave our desks."

If this was all the Volicon Observer system was able to do, it would be enough. But, as I learned during a hands-on demonstration over the Web, the Observer is far, far more powerful than this.

For instance, the Observer has the capability not just to monitor the competition, but to compare their on-air performance

with their ratings on a minute-by-minute basis. You can even do a cross-comparison across multiple channels—including your own—to see what each station in your market was playing in the same instance of time, and how this content appealed to the viewers. You can also actually compare shifts in ratings with changes in your programming, again on a minute-by-minute basis. Best yet, multiple users can access this data along with you at the same time, whether across their corporate LANs or remotely via the Web.

“What we have done is extend the concept of simple digital logging so that it encompasses many complex and informative functions,” said Eli Warsawski, Volicon’s president and CEO. “Beyond ratings comparison, the Observer can verify ad plays to sponsors, alert engineers to signal failures quickly and ensure that broadcasters comply with FCC standards for program logging.”

**OBSERVER: THE WALKTHROUGH** For the user, the Volicon Observer system appears to be nothing more than a simple Web page. Dominating the screen is a large video window, with VCR-style controls at the bottom. Also included are buttons for live feeds and buttons that create multi-pane windows so that you can watch many channels at once.

On the left side of the Observer page are boxes for each of the channels coming into the system. The more you click, the more will appear in the multi-paned display window. One nice feature: the Observer simply adds MPEG-4 streams as requested, increasing its bandwidth as needed. This means that your video quality stays constant, whether you are viewing one channel or several.

On the top left menu bar are five headings: Home, Clips, Programs, Preferences, and Logout. Home takes you to the main page, while Logout takes you out of the session.

Clips allows you to create specific clips for emailing to other station members, advertisers (for ad playback verification) or the FCC. To make this easy, Observer allows you to search your company’s video archives for the desired clip by specific channels, dates and time of day. (The system holds video for 90 days. After that, it is archived



on DVD; one disk can hold up to 24 hours of MPEG-4 video.) You can use the View tab to see filed clips and clips that have been emailed to you. You can even look for clips using a closed captioning database—because Observer stores closed captions when it stores audio and video—under CC Search.

The Programs tab allows you to specify the programs/channels to compare against ratings data. This can be done across one or more channels simultaneously. “You can just click on a specific peak or valley on the ratings graph, and the windows of each channel will change automatically to reflect what was on during that moment of time,” said Julius Perl, Volicon’s director of marketing. Finally, the Preferences tab allows you to alter recording times, time zones, and reset the user password. “You can automatically record from one hour to 24 hours, depending on your needs,” according to Perl.

**POSSIBILITIES** Keeping an eye on the competition is just one of many possible Observer applications. Another is trouble monitoring; when a monitored channel goes black or silent, Observer can be programmed to send a warning email and a video clip directly to the engineer on call.

This capability convinced Discovery Networks Latin America/Iberia to use Observer to monitor its 23 channels, many of which are operating in dual language (English/Spanish or Portuguese/Spanish) mode. Observer also helps DNLA/I “instantly retrieve and email requested clips as proof

**Volicon’s Observer system not only gets rid of tape in the front office, it allows you to monitor your competition in real-time. Once ratings are available, you can monitor your competition with all streams and ratings data time-locked together to see what’s really happening with viewership. The number of streams is CPU dependent. With a 3 GHz Pentium, up to eight full-motion streams or as many as 30 keyframe streams are possible.**

of advertising to our clients, as well as remotely monitor our broadcasts by streaming them live over the Web,” said DNLA/I acting Senior Vice President of Operations Lisa Hyams.

Beyond trouble monitoring and storing video to comply with FCC regulations, Observer makes it possible to review the on-air staff’s performance at the click of a button. Have the phones been ringing off the hooks because of the anchor’s off-hand comment during the handoff to Sports? A quick look at Observer can show management what happened.

Similarly, Observer can be set to alert news directors whenever the competition cuts in with a news bulletin. As well, the system can automatically record whatever footage they are running with, allowing the news director not only to catch up fast, but also see what he’s up against. Since Observer can email clips, news crews in the field can see what the competition’s got via wireless email. In fact, it is even possible to have one staffer monitor all local channels simultaneously during a breaking news event, alerting reporters whenever something new turns up on another channel. In the ratings game, such intelligence can make the difference in catching up with other newsrooms, and getting ahead.

That’s not all: Observer can also be used to scout other channels for talent, and to see firsthand what innovative features and formats other broadcasters are testing. All told, Observer can be a very powerful weapon in a broadcaster’s arsenal.

**CONSIDERATIONS** If you are considering implementing Observer, be sure to check that your computers are capable of running this software. “We recommend Pentium 4 processors and Windows XP to get the best performance out of Observer,” Warsawski told TVB.

As well, be aware that every time you add a channel to your Observer’s window, you

are eating extra bandwidth. This is necessary to ensure picture quality—it is possible to set each channel's stream size from 128kbps to 3Mbps, if you've got the network headroom—but it does result in higher bandwidth consumption.

## **MORE THAN JUST GETTING RID OF TAPE**

In the grand scheme of things, the considerations listed above are minor when compared to Observer's capabilities. Finally, it is possible to dump VHS tape-based monitoring, and move to a compact, efficient, and highly-capable digital solution, one that corresponds closely to what broadcasters actually need since it provides much more intelligence than a simple tape replacement system.

This is no accident. "We built Observer by talking first to broadcast managers, and then to our engineers," Warsawski said. "We listened to the market. We listened to what people asked us to do." Still, the fact



**Using MPEG-4, Volicon's Observer System adds streams as requested, increasing its bandwidth as needed. This means that your video quality stays constant, whether you are viewing one channel or several. It is possible to set each channel's stream size from 128kbps to 3Mbps, if you've got the network headroom—but it does result in higher bandwidth consumption.**

that Observer can do so many things, and do them so well, is undeniably impressive.

*James Careless covers the television industry. He can be reached at [jamesc@tjtdesign.com](mailto:jamesc@tjtdesign.com).*

## For more info

**Demo Volicon's Observer**

[www.volicon.com/demo-signup.html](http://www.volicon.com/demo-signup.html)