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(54) **Electronic means for switching antennas to a common bus.**

(57) A circuit for selecting an input to a signal processing network from among several switchable antenna units. Each antenna unit includes a winding which is connected to a common signal bus. The switchable antenna units may be placed in "on" or "off" states in response to a controller, such as a microprocessor. One terminal of each winding is

connected to a transistor which causes the terminal to be in an open condition when the unit is unselected, attenuating any signal which might otherwise be transmitted to the signal bus. A second winding is inductively coupled to the first winding and is used to improve attenuation of unselected signals.

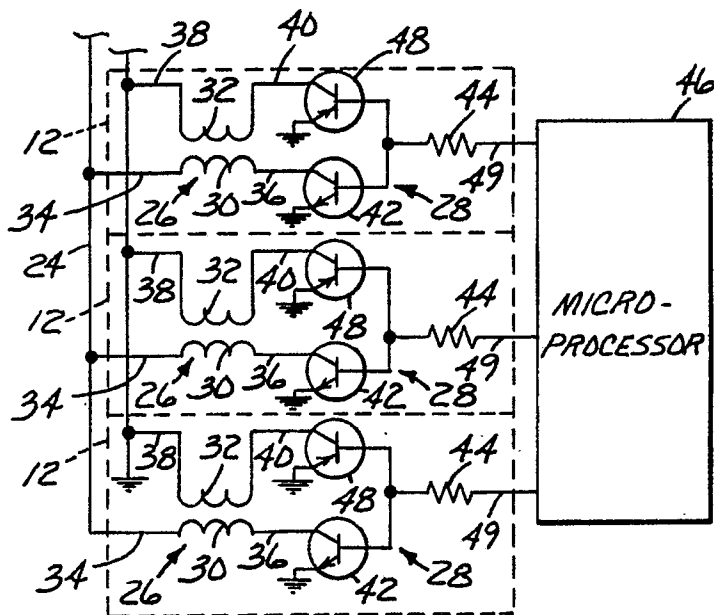


Fig. 3

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ELECTRONIC MEANS FOR SWITCHING ANTENNAS TO A COMMON BUS

Background of the Invention

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention generally relates to electronic switches, and more particularly to electronic control of switchable antenna units utilizing a common signal bus.

2. Description of the Prior Art

Antenna arrays are used in a variety of applications, such as underground cable location, radio navigation, and electromagnetic field detection. It is often necessary to route the signals from multiple antennas to a signal processing network in order to prepare the signals for data analysis. Where the application permits, it is desirable to utilize a single signal processing network for the entire antenna array rather than using multiple networks, i.e., one for each antenna. Because of this, systems have been devised which sequentially switch the network input from one antenna to another.

The simplest mechanism for achieving sequential inputs is a manual switch, such as a single pole-single throw contact. A plurality of such devices may be used in an antenna array (one for each antenna), or a multicontact switch may be used. A more convenient alternative is a conventional relay, such as a solenoid coil utilizing an armature contact. An example of a relay used in conjunction with two antennas is disclosed in U.S. Patent No. 4,387,340 issued to E. Peterman (and in the divisional case, U.S. Patent No. 4,520,317).

For most applications, however, the switching time of such relays is highly unsatisfactory. An improved, quicker design is illustrated in U.S. Patent No. 4,542,344 issued to Darilek et al. A simplified version of the electrical configuration of that device is shown in Figure 1. The prior art structure includes a plurality of loop antennas **1**, each connected to one of a plurality of pre-amplifiers **2**. The outputs of preamps **2** are connected to a multiplexer **3** which is regulated by a controller **4**. Controller **4** selects the antenna or channel to be analyzed at any given time. The selected signal is then directed from multiplexer **3** to the signal processor circuit **5**, which conveys data in a comprehensible form to an output device (display) **6** via controller **4**.

The foregoing devices still possess a significant disadvantage, to wit, the necessity of providing a pre-amplifier for each antenna. This

drawback, which is uneconomical and redundant, is accentuated by the fact that other electrical components may have to be provided for each antenna. For example, Figure 3 of U.S. Patent No. 4,295,095 issued to Thomas et al. shows use of a plurality of filters, one for each channel, in addition to the preamplifiers. It would, therefore, be desirable and advantageous to devise means for selectively switching the input of a signal processor from among a plurality of antennas without requiring the redundant use of electrical components for each antenna channel.

Accordingly, the primary object of the present invention is to provide means for selecting a signal from one of a plurality of antennas.

Another object of the invention is to provide such means having a rapid switching time.

Still another object of the invention is to provide switchable antenna units whose output may be directed to a common signal bus.

Yet another object of the invention is to provide a switchable antenna unit that does not require preamplifiers or other signal conditioning components.

A further object of the invention is to provide such a switchable antenna unit having sufficient attenuation of the signal when the unit is not selected.

Summary of the Invention

The foregoing objects are achieved in a switchable antenna unit having a loop antenna and switching means for selectively enabling and disabling the antenna. The antenna includes a first winding, one end of which is connected to a common signal bus. The second end of the first winding is effectively open in the disabled or unselected state, resulting in signal attenuation. The switching means is responsive to a controller and, when enabled, causes the second end of the first winding to become connected to ground, thereby allowing signal transmission to the common bus.

A second winding is provided as part of the switching means, the second winding being inductively coupled to the first winding. When the switching means is disabled, the second winding is effectively shorted and provides improved attenuation of the signal from the first winding. In the preferred embodiment, the switching means comprises a NPN transistor connected to the first winding, and a PNP transistor connected to the second winding, the base of each transistor being connected to the controller.

Brief Description of the Drawings

The novel features of the invention are set forth in the appended claims. The invention itself, however, will best be understood by reference to the accompanying drawings, wherein:

Figure 1 is a block electrical diagram of a typical prior art antenna array utilizing a plurality of pre-amplifiers.

Figure 2 is a block electrical diagram of the present invention showing the switchable antenna units connected to a common signal bus.

Figure 3 is a detailed electrical schematic of the preferred embodiment of the switchable antenna units of the present invention.

Figure 4 is a detailed electrical schematic of an alternative embodiment utilizing MOSFET's.

Figure 5 is a detailed electrical schematic of an alternative embodiment providing a differential input to a paired signal bus.

Figure 6 is a detailed electrical schematic of an alternative embodiment in which the antenna and a capacitor form a bridge circuit.

Description of the Preferred Embodiment

With reference now to the figures, and in particular with reference to Figure 2, there is depicted a network 10 for processing signals obtained from multiple antennas. Network 10 includes a plurality of switchable antenna units 12, a preamplifier 14, a controller 16, a signal processor 18, an input device 20, and an output device 22. Details of switchable antenna units 12 are discussed later in conjunction with Figures 3-6. The remaining components of network 10 are generally described below but, inasmuch as network 10 has several different applications, it will be appreciated that the exact configuration of these components greatly depends on the particular purpose for which network 10 is being used. Various configurations will readily become apparent to those skilled in the art.

Controller 16 may be a microprocessor (including RAM, ROM, etc.), or simply a clock pulse generator, as shown in U.S. Patent No. 4,295,095 issued to Thomas et al. If controller 16 is a clock pulse generator or other non-programmable component, then input device 20 is unnecessary. Therefore, its inclusion in network 10 is optional. Even if controller 16 is a microprocessor, input device 20 may still be unnecessary, e.g., where the microprocessor is pre-programmed and no user inputs are required. An example of such an application is shown in U.S. Patent No. 4,542,344 issued to Darilek et al. If, however, network 10 is designed to require or allow user inputs (for either initial setup parameters or interactive participation)

then input device 20 may conveniently take the form of a keypad. Controller 16 provides control signals for switching antenna units 12 between "on" and "off" states.

Switchable antenna units 12 are each connected to preamp 14 by a common signal bus 24. preamp 14 is any conventional amplifier, and serves to boost the signal to an intermediate level for further processing. The signals from antenna units 12 are conveyed directly from preamp 14 to signal processor 18. Signal processor 18 may be as simple as an amplitude detector (see U.S. Patent No. 4,438,389 issued to A. DeSa), or may include other signal conditioning devices, such as an automatic gain control, a bandpass filter, a variable gain amplifier (see the Thomas et al. patent), an analog-to-digital converter (see the Darilek patent), etc., or any combination thereof. The processed signals are generally conveyed to controller 16 which performs data analysis (e.g., amplitude ratios, phase comparisons, etc.), and outputs appropriate information to output device 22, typically an alphanumeric display.

Referring now to Figure 3, the detailed construction of the switchable antenna units 12 is shown. Each switchable antenna unit 12 includes antenna means 26 and switching means 28. In the preferred embodiment, antenna means 26 is a loop-type antenna or induction coil, comprising a first winding 30, which receives ambient electromagnetic signals. In practice, first winding 30 is wrapped around a ferrite core, and a second winding 32 is physically wound over (and thus inductively coupled to) first winding 30. Therefore, the windings may conveniently be referred to as inner winding 30 and outer winding 32. Those skilled in the art will appreciate, however, that windings 30 and 32 could be placed side by side, both wrapped around the same core, or in any other manner which would inductively couple them together. Due to their physical proximity, inner and outer windings 32 might together be construed as antenna means 26 but, as noted below, outer winding 32 is actually part of switching means 28.

Each inner winding 30 has two terminals 34 and 36, terminal 34 (the output of antenna means 26) being connected to common signal bus 24, and terminal 36 being connected to switching means 28. Similarly, each outer winding 32 has two terminals 38 and 40, connected to ground and switching means 28, respectively. Winding 30 provides signal reception to bus 24, and winding 32 serves to attenuate the signal when that particular antenna unit 12 is unselected.

Switching means 28 is designed to switch antenna means 26 between "on" and "off" states, and could alternatively be described as enabling or disabling means. In the off state, terminal 36 of

inner winding 30 is effectively open, which attenuates any signal that might otherwise be passed to bus 24. In the on state, terminal 36 is connected to ground, which allows the signal to flow to bus 24. In the preferred embodiment, switching means 28 includes an NPN transistor 42 whose collector is connected to terminal 36 of inner winding 30. The emitter of transistor 42 is connected to ground, and its base is connected, via a current limiting resistor 44, to the controller which, in the preferred embodiment, is a microprocessor 46.

Outer winding 32 is connected to switching means 28 in a manner similar to inner winding 30. One terminal 38 of outer winding 32 is connected to a common ground, and the other terminal 40 is connected to the collector of a PNP transistor 48. The emitter of PNP transistor 48 is connected to ground. The base of transistor 48 is connected to resistor 44, which is in turn connected to microprocessor 46. It is anticipated that a microprocessor such as that sold under part number MC68HC11 by Motorola, of Austin, Texas, would be sufficient for the purposes contemplated herein.

Operation of switchable antenna units 12 is straightforward. A given switchable antenna unit is selected for signal reception when its control line 49 is biased positive with respect to ground. Conversely, a given unit is unselected when its control line 49 is biased negative with respect to ground.

For an unselected unit, transistor 42 is turned off, effectively leaving inner winding 30 in an open state which naturally attenuates signals that would otherwise be efficiently transmitted to bus 24. Transistor 48, on the other hand, is turned on, shorting outer winding 32. This also effectively shorts out inner winding 30, since the coefficient of coupling between the two windings is high, resulting in further attenuation of signals emanating from the unselected antenna unit. In this respect, outer winding 32 is properly considered part of switching means 28, rather than part of antenna means 26, since outer winding 32 does not present any signal to bus 24 and serves only to attenuate the signal in inner winding 30.

For the selected unit, transistor 42 receives a (positive) reference voltage from microprocessor 46, which turns transistor 42 on and allows the signal from inner winding 30 to pass to common bus 24. At the same time, transistor 48 is turned off, leaving outer winding 32 in an open state which has a negligible effect on signal reception. It should be noted that switchable antenna unit 12 might include only inner winding 30 without outer winding 32. In such a case, switching means 28 would include transistor 42 only, and not transistor 48. For attenuation purposes, however, it is desirable to include an outer winding 32 which is also responsive to switching means 28.

In order to optimize the efficiency of switchable antenna units 12, it is advisable to provide transistors with a low dynamic saturation resistance and low collector to base capacitance. A low saturation resistance (from collector to emitter when the transistor is on) minimizes transistor noise in comparison to the desired antenna signal. A low collector to base capacitance is desirable for maximizing attenuation of the unwanted signal when switchable antenna unit 12 is in the off state. A transistor sold under part number NR041 by National Semiconductor of Santa Clara, California, has proven acceptable for the frequency range of 10 kilohertz to 1 megahertz.

It is also beneficial to keep the capacitance between inner and outer windings 30 and 32 as low as possible in order to improve attenuation of the signal when the antenna unit is unselected. This may be accomplished by increasing the separation between the windings which decreases the capacitance; however, this also decreases the mutual inductance between the windings, which is undesirable since attenuation improves with increased mutual inductance. Therefore, it is necessary to find an intermediate separation which optimizes both the capacitance between the windings and their mutual inductance. The inventor has found that a separation distance in the range of 0.7 to 1.5 millimeters is optimal for antenna windings approximately 5 centimeters long and about 1 centimeter in diameter.

Some alternative embodiments of the present invention are shown in Figures 4 through 6. With reference to Figure 4, a switchable antenna unit 50 utilizing metal oxide semiconductor field-effect transistors (MOSFET's) is explained. In this embodiment, the transistors of Figure 3 have been replaced with n-type MOSFET's 52. Each MOSFET 52 essentially functions in the same manner as transistor 42, but is less preferable since its resistance (in the on state) is generally higher than that of a bipolar transistor having approximately the same capacitance (in the off state). Additionally, switching transients are usually larger with MOSFET's than with bipolar transistors.

Figure 4 illustrates another design alternative which may be used with either MOSFET's or bipolar transistors, namely, the use of two semiconductor devices of the same type as opposed to the use of complimentary devices. This requires the provision of two control lines for each switchable antenna unit. In switchable antenna unit 50, one control line 54 is connected to MOSFET 52 which regulates inner winding 30, and the second line 56 is connected to MOSFET 52' which controls outer winding 32. In this configuration, it is presumed that the control signals emanating from microprocessor 46 are complementary, e.g., if line 54 is at zero

volts, then line 56 is at the positive reference voltage. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that a single control line setup (such as that shown in Figure 3) using MOSFET's may be afforded by making MOSFET 52' a p-type MOSFET. Alternatively, the two control line setup (with complementary control signals) may be used with bipolar transistors, in which case transistors 42 and 48 of Figure 3 would both be NPN transistors.

Referring now to Figure 5, a balanced antenna unit 60 is shown. Balanced antenna unit 60 still utilizes transistors 42 and 48, but additionally includes transistors 42' and 48' in a symmetric configuration. The terminals 38 and 40 of outer winding 32 are connected to the collectors of PNP transistors 48' and 48, respectively. The terminals 34 and 36 of inner winding 30 are similarly connected to the collectors of NPN transistors 42' and 42, respectively. Now, however, inner winding 30 has been split, creating two intermediate output lines 62 and 64 which are connected to common signal buses 24a and 24b, respectively. Signal buses 24a and 24b are connected to a balanced transformer 66 whose output is directed to preamp 14. The emitters of all the transistors are connected to ground, and the bases of all the transistors are connected to micro processor 46 via resistors 44. Balanced antenna unit 60 is useful in reducing noise from switching transients; the noise is attenuated since it occurs as a common mode input to balanced input transformer 66. The design shown in Figure 5 is, however, more costly than the preferred embodiment of Figure 3.

Another alternative embodiment is shown in Figure 6, to which attention is now directed. Figure 6 illustrates the use of a bridged antenna unit 70 having two identical windings 72 and 74. One terminal of winding 72 is attached to the collector of NPN transistor 42, and one terminal of winding 74 is connected to a terminal of a variable capacitor 76. The other terminals of windings 72 and 74 are joined to provide a common output to signal bus 24. When variable capacitor 76 is properly adjusted (to the collector-base capacitance of transistor 42), antenna unit 70 forms a bridged circuit in the off state. In this state, the signals from windings 72 and 74 cancel each other out, resulting in a negligible output to common signal bus 24. The primary disadvantage of this structure is the great care which must be taken in adjusting variable capacitor 76 in order to achieve a balanced circuit.

Although the invention has been described with reference to specific embodiments, this description is not meant to be construed in a limiting sense. Various modifications of the disclosed embodiment, as well as alternative embodiments of the invention, will become apparent to persons skilled in the art upon reference to the description of the invention.

For example, the antenna units may be tuned by the addition of a capacitor across the common signal bus if frequency selectivity were required (although this is deemed undesirable since it would affect the attenuation of unselected antenna signals). It is therefore contemplated that the appended claims will cover such modifications that fall within the true scope of the invention.

Claims

1. A switchable antenna unit for receiving and conveying electromagnetic signals to a signal bus, comprising:

antenna means having a first terminal for connection to the signal bus, and having a second terminal; and

switching means connected to said second terminal of said antenna means for selectively attenuating signals received by said antenna means, said switching means having an "on" state and an "off" state whereby, when said switching means is in said "on" state, said antenna means conveys said received signals to said first terminal and, when said switching means is in said "off" state, said received signals are attenuated by said switching means.

2. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 1 wherein said antenna means includes a first winding, and said switching means includes a second winding inductively coupled to said first winding.

3. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 1 wherein said switching means causes said second terminal of said antenna means to be connected to ground when said switching means is in said "on" state, and said switching means causes said second terminal of said antenna means to be effectively open when said switching means is in said "off" state.

4. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 1 wherein said switching means has a control line for connection to an external controller.

5. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 4 wherein said switching means includes a transistor having a collector, a base, and an emitter, said collector being connected to said second terminal of said antenna means, said base being connected to said control line, and said emitter being connected to ground.

6. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 4 wherein said switching means includes a metal oxide semiconductor field-effect transistor having a drain, a gate, and a source, said drain being connected to said second terminal of said antenna means, said gate being connected to said control line, and said source being connected to ground.

7. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 4 wherein said antenna means includes a first winding, and

said switching means includes a second winding inductively coupled to said first winding.

8. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 4 wherein: said antenna means comprises a first winding having a first terminal for connection to the common signal bus, and having a second terminal; and said switching means comprises:

a transistor having a collector, a base, and an emitter, said collector being connected to said second terminal of said first winding, said base being connected to said control line, and said emitter being connected to ground,

a second winding having a first terminal connected to said first terminal of said first winding, and having a second terminal, and

a capacitor having a first terminal connected to said second terminal of said second winding, and having a second terminal connected to ground.

9. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 7 wherein: said switching means further includes first and second transistors each having a collector, a base, and an emitter;

said collector of said first transistor being connected to said second terminal of said first winding; said collector of said second transistor being connected to said second terminal of said second winding;

said bases of said first and second transistors being connected to said control line; and

said emitters of said first and second transistors being connected to ground.

10. An apparatus for selectively outputting signals received by an antenna array, comprising:

a common signal bus;

a plurality of switchable antenna units, each comprising:

antenna means having a first terminal connected to said common signal bus, and having a second terminal, and

switching means connected to said second terminal of said antenna means for selectively attenuating signals received by said antenna means, said switching means having an "on" state and an "off" state whereby, when said switching means is in said "on" state, said antenna means outputs said received signals to said common signal bus and, when said switching means is in said "off" state, said received signals are attenuated by said switching means, said switching means further having a control line; and

control means connected to each said control line for selectively switching each said switching means between "on" and "off" states.

11. The switchable antenna unit of Claim 10 wherein said switching means causes said second terminal of said antenna means to be connected to ground when said switching means is in said "on" state, and said switching means causes said sec-

ond terminal of said antenna means to be effectively open when said switching means is in said "off" state.

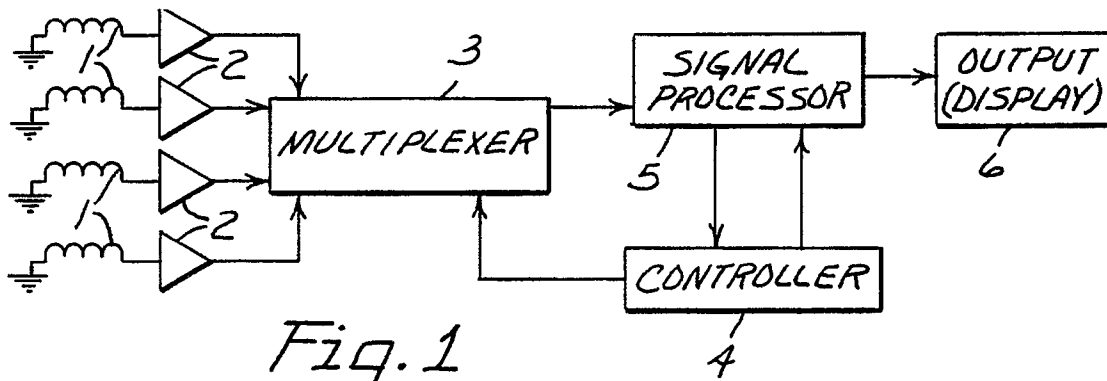


Fig. 1
(PRIOR ART)

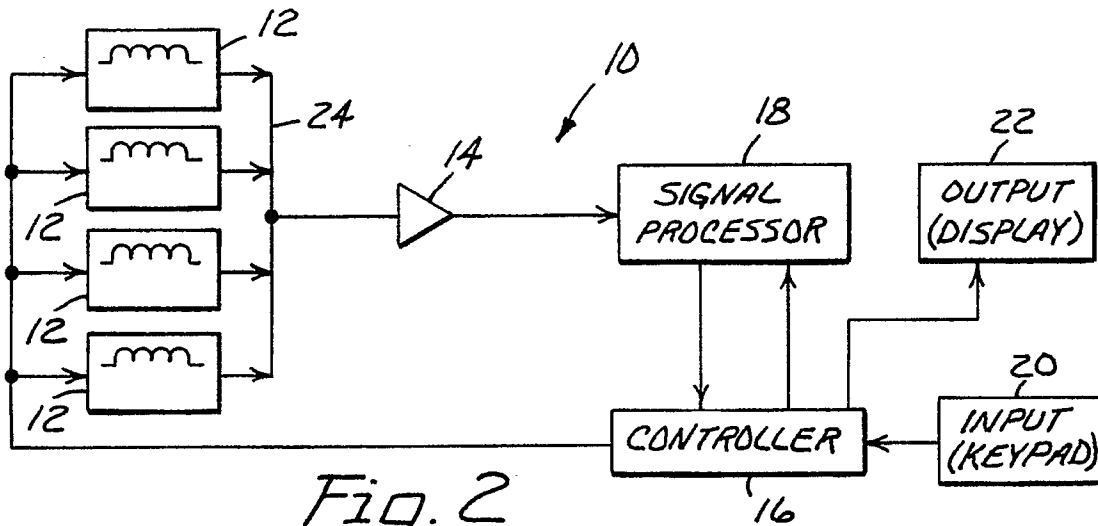


Fig. 2

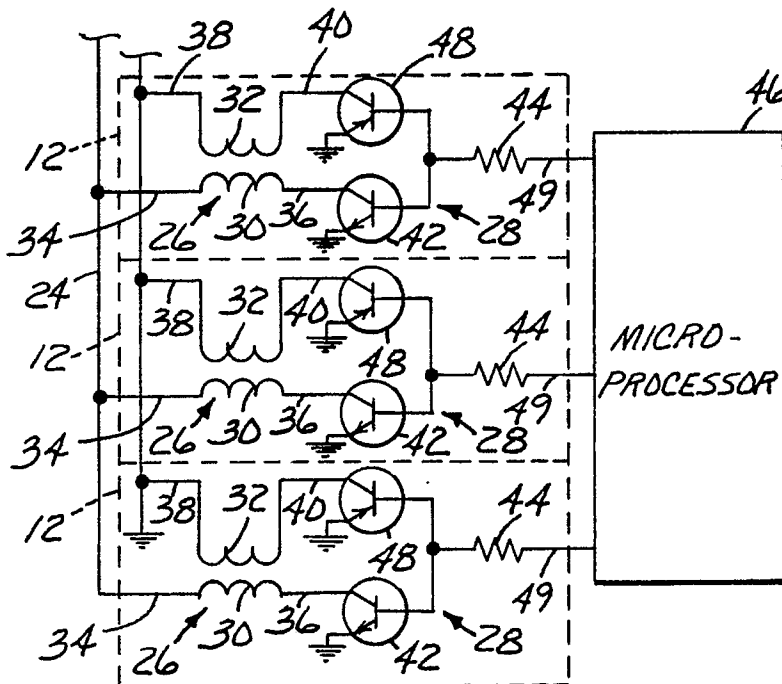


Fig. 3

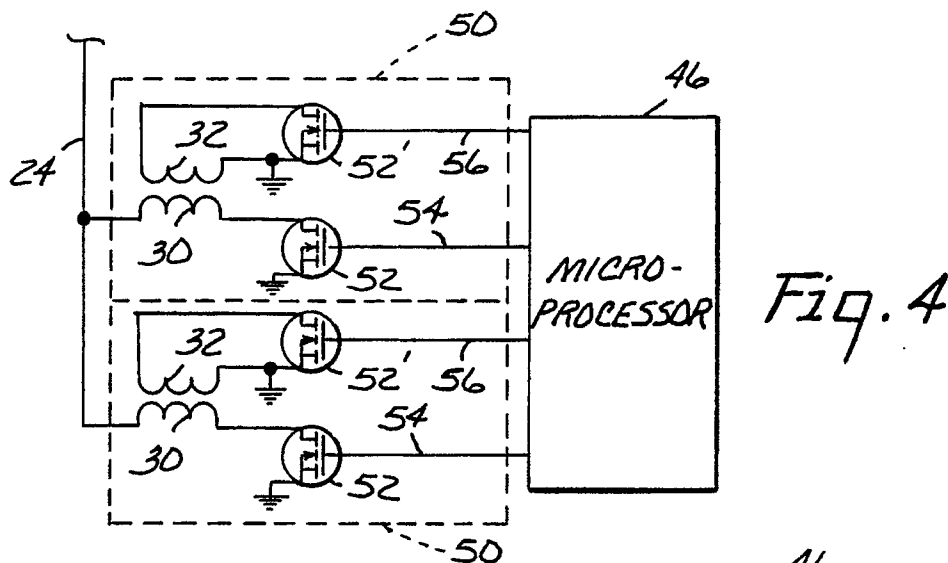


Fig. 4

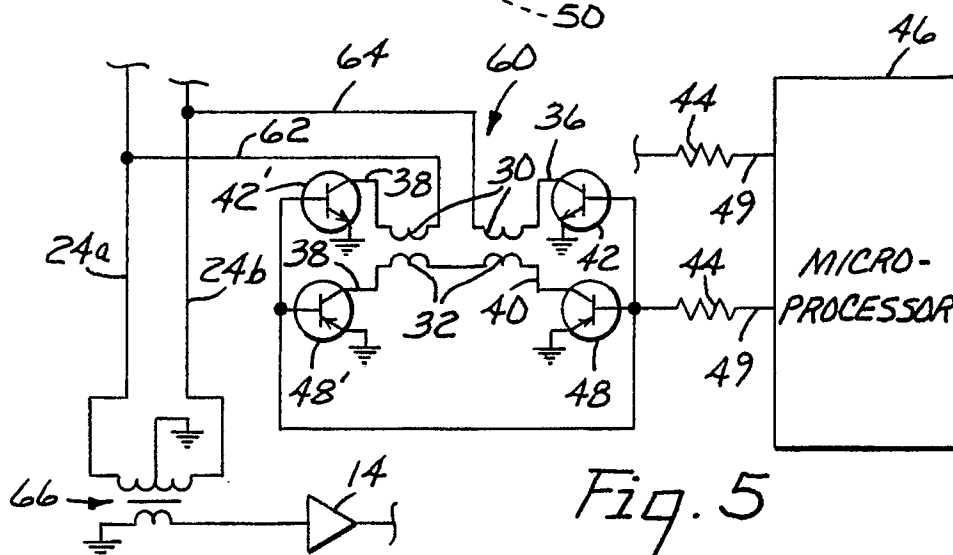


Fig. 5

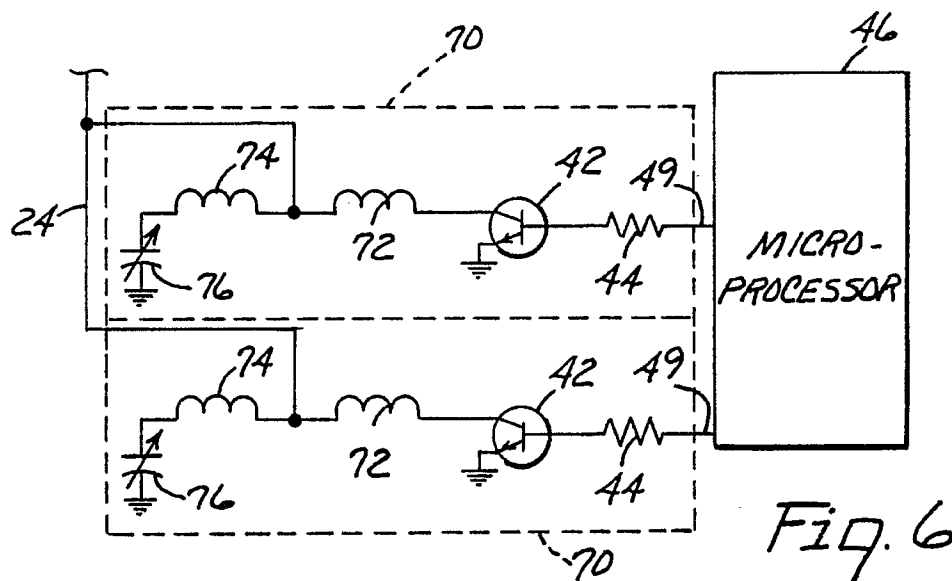


Fig. 6