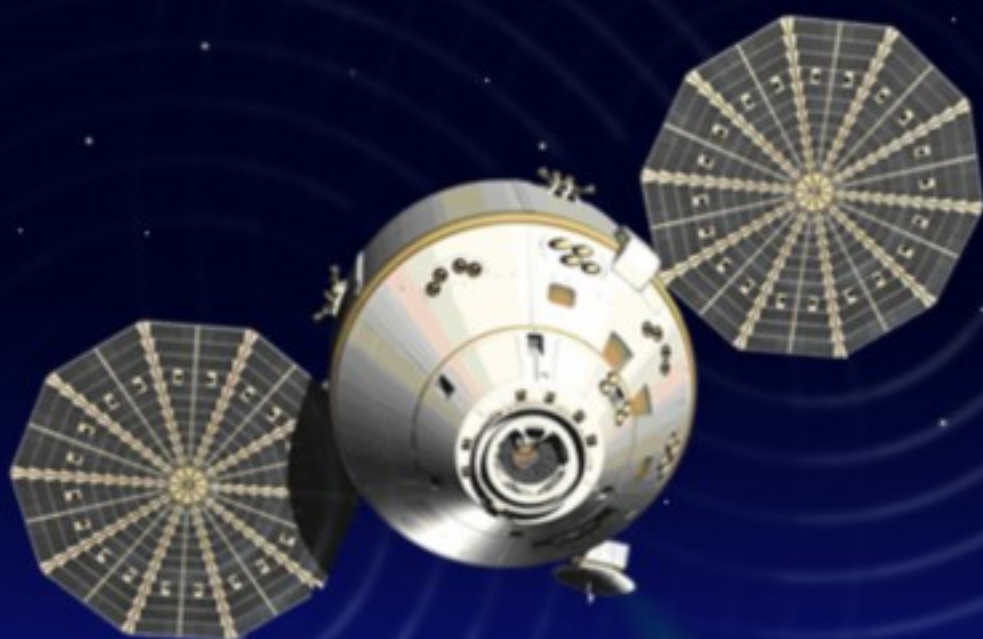


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## Wearable Battery-free Wireless 2-Channel EEG Systems Powered by Energy Scavengers

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**Abstract:** Thermoelectric generators worn on a person's body have demonstrated their capability to power a variety of wireless sensor nodes that are to improve his/her health or comfort. In this article, the design, fabrication and performance of two prototypes of a battery-free wireless 2-channel electroencephalography (EEG) system are presented. The first system is powered solely by a thermoelectric generator that produces 2-2.5mW of power and is worn as a headband. The second system resembles a diadem or headphones and uses a hybrid power supply that combines a thermoelectric generator and photovoltaic cells in one device. This portable EEG headset considerably improves the comfort of patients in clinical as well as in non-clinical environments and opens perspectives for a new range of non-clinical applications. *Copyright © 2008 IFSA.*

**Keywords:** Thermoelectric generator, Wireless sensor node, Wireless electroencephalography, Photovoltaic cell

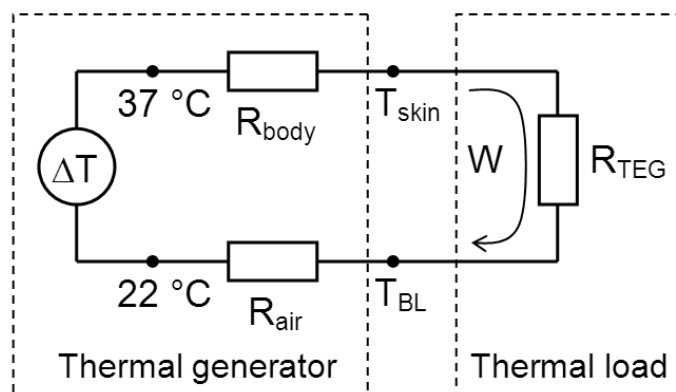
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## 1. Introduction: Scavenging Thermal Energy on Human Beings

Body area networks consisting of multiple sensors, transducers and transceivers deployed on the human body, call for new types of power supply that last longer than traditional batteries. Solar cells seem an obvious first solution in view of their efficiency and the maturity of photovoltaic technology. However, at indoor conditions, sufficient access to solar energy is seldom guaranteed. Miniaturized thermoelectric generators (TEGs) that harvest human body heat offer a promising alternative: they are environmentally friendly, have an unlimited lifetime and offer the possibility of monolithic integration with other components. TEGs exploit the Seebeck effect to transform a temperature difference into electricity. A TEG is made of thermopiles sandwiched in between a hot plate and a cold plate. Thermopiles are in turn made of a large number of thermocouples connected thermally in parallel and electrically in series.

The design of an efficient TEG for application on a human body is however difficult for two main reasons. Firstly, the temperature difference between the human skin and ambient air is usually small, between 10 and 15°C. Secondly, only a small fraction of this temperature difference drops across the thermopile due to the necessity of a large temperature drop between the cold plate and air to dissipate the heat.

To make efficient TEGs that are able to produce tens or hundreds microwatts, which in addition are comfortable for their wearer and which are interesting for moving into mass production, a few rules must be obeyed. Firstly, the TEG cannot be designed independently from its environment, and the conditions of its thermal matching with the latter, i.e., the heat source (human being) and the heat sink (ambient air), must be satisfied [1], see Fig. 1. The thermal resistance of the thermopile may not be much less than the one of the heat source and ambient air, otherwise, the temperature difference on the thermopile becomes too small. Modeling an optimal thermopile that allows thermal matching and simultaneously produces a voltage large enough (e.g., 1V or more) to power electronics holds requirements for the small cross section, the high aspect ratio (the ratio of the length of thermocouple legs to their lateral dimension) and the large number of thermocouple legs (over one thousand). Small-size thermopiles available on the market do not fit the requirements coming out of modeling, unless multi-stage thermopiles are used. To provide better thermal matching of the TEG to the environment for maximizing power generation, some other helpful practical hints exist. E.g., proper positioning of the TEG on the human being offers much lower local thermal resistance of the body than its average value. Another useful tool is a small radiator on the outer side of the TEG for efficient heat dissipation into ambient air. It effectively reduces the thermal resistance of both ambient air and the human body itself [2].



**Fig. 1.** Generalized thermal circuit of a wearable thermoelectric generator. Typical parameters are  $R_{\text{body}}=200\text{-}500\text{ cm}^2\text{K/W}$ ,  $R_{\text{air}}=500\text{-}1000\text{ cm}^2\text{K/W}$ , optimal  $R_{\text{TEG}}=300\text{-}800\text{ cm}^2\text{K/W}$ .

Secondly, TEGs on a living being should be comfortable for their wearer. This means that the heat flow through the TEG and therefore through the skin must be limited in order not to decrease the skin temperature below comfortable values of 30-35°C and not to overcool the inner organs in cold weather. Hence, a proper and safe location of the device on living beings is required and the knowledge of its body properties is very important for designing wearable TEGs. E.g., small wrist devices seem the most convenient for users because they resemble a watch, however, the nighttime power generation can be interrupted, e.g. by putting the hand under a blanket/pillow while sleeping. It is obvious that on a sleeping person the head is the only body part which could provide continuous performance. Moreover, the brain temperature is well-maintained, and therefore, a large heat flow can be reached. However, a TEG in this location may cause overcooling of the brain in cold weather. IMEC has therefore extensively studied thermal features of the human body such as local thermal resistance and heat flow from the skin [2, 3].

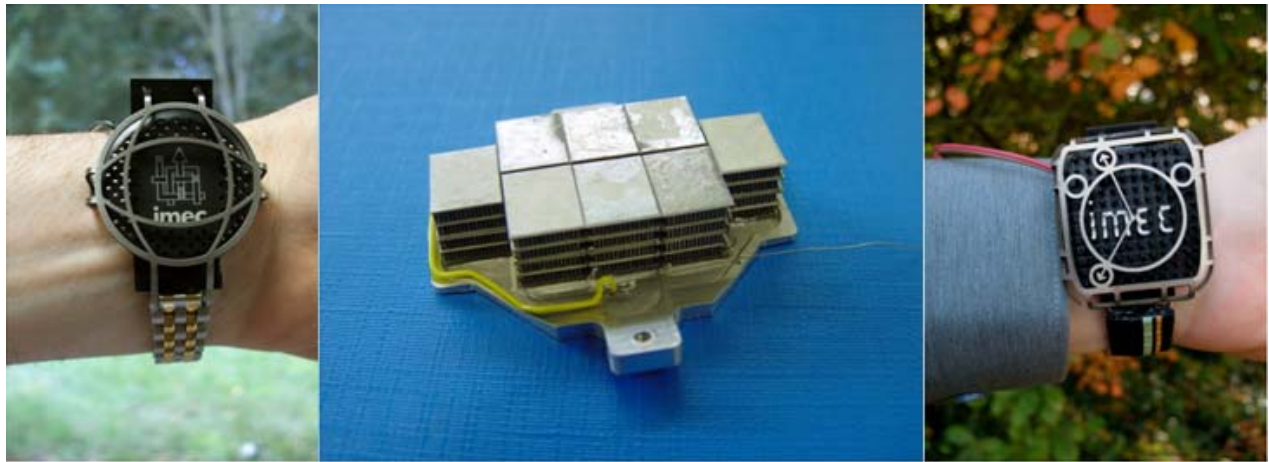
Thirdly, the size of energy scavengers is an important factor for their acceptance by industry and for moving them into mass production. Their size should be small enough in order to successfully compete with battery-powered devices. Such small-sized devices are also imposed by the applications they target, i.e., wearable wireless sensor nodes.

An intensive study of the performance of TEGs developed at IMEC and the Holst Centre allowed predicting the average limits for power production on man. At normal indoor conditions, the upper level is equal to about 30  $\mu\text{W}$  per square centimeter occupying on the skin, on 24-hour average. It should be stressed that this is the acceptance-related limit [2, 3]. Taking into account the requirement of 50-100  $\mu\text{W}$  necessary for the data processing and radio transmission, the self-powered wireless sensor nodes typically occupy an area of several square centimeters like a watch.

In 2004, IMEC and Holst Centre have fabricated their first wearable thermoelectric generators serving as power supplies for wireless sensor nodes worn on a wrist [2]. At 22°C, the TEGs produced 100 $\mu\text{W}$  of power, enough for powering the electronics and a few-meter range radio for transmitting several measured parameters to a nearby PC every 15 s. However, even the best commercially available thermopiles arranged in a 4-stage assembly did not offer a good thermal matching and resulted in a comparatively bulky device. In 2005, improved versions were fabricated, which were better adapted to the human body and ambient air because of reduced dimensions of the thermopiles. As a result of decreasing the leg cross section by a factor of two, the TEG dimensions were successfully halved to the size of a man's watch, thereby significantly improving its acceptance by the users. At typical indoor temperatures, it generated a daytime power of 0.2-0.3 mW. Two versions have been developed, one for indoor use and one for outdoor use, each with a specially designed radiator (see Fig. 2). In 2006, a wireless pulse oximeter has been designed, powered by a TEG similar to the one of 2005. In this device, the power consumption of the electronics has been dramatically reduced to match it with the power produced by the TEG. More details of this first battery-free medical device can be found in [4], see also Fig. 3. These systems have demonstrated that the power unobtrusively obtainable on the human body is large enough to power practical applications.

In this article, a more complex device, a wireless 2-channel electroencephalogram (EEG) system is described. The device is powered by a TEG that is the most powerful among the TEGs fabricated and is located on a person's forehead. In an improved design, solar cells are added as a second power supply.





**Fig. 2.** Wrist TEGs fabricated in 2005 for outdoor use (left, waterproof) and for indoor use (right). The thermopile unit of the indoor version is shown in the middle assembled with a hot plate.



**Fig. 3.** Body-powered pulse oximeter [4] and the application running on a laptop with a measurement time of 4 s and an update rate of 15 s.

## 2. Human Electroencephalograms

Electroencephalography (EEG) refers to the measurement of electrical activity produced by the brain as recorded from electrodes placed on the scalp. EEG is principally used as a non-invasive clinical tool to evaluate the brain function, especially for patients suffering from epilepsy, sleeping disorder etc. EEG signals are generated by post-synaptic potentials and are composed of multiple oscillations, each having different characteristic frequencies, amplitudes and spatial distributions. From the frequency distribution of the brain waves, the function of an organ can be identified or diseases can be recognized. The EEG signal is typically described in terms of rhythmic activity, which is divided into frequency bands. E.g., rhythmic activity between 8-12 Hz is described as ‘alpha’ rhythm and is evoked by closing the eyes and by relaxation.

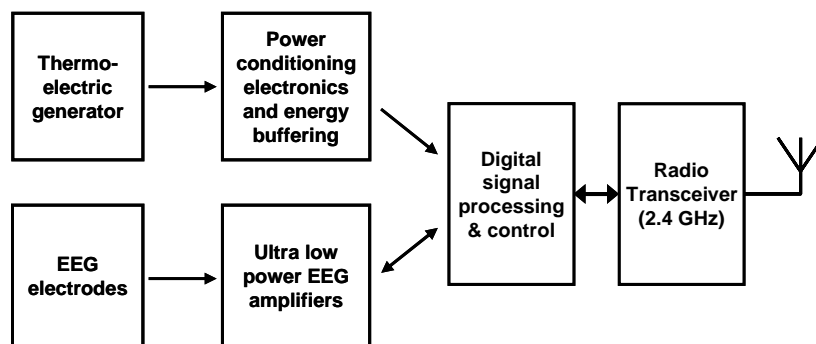
EEG signals are recorded by connecting electrodes on the scalp. These electrodes act as a transducer and convert the ionic current inside the brain into electronic current so that the readout circuit can amplify this biopotential signal. The main features of these signals are their very low amplitude

(typically 1-100  $\mu\text{V}$ ) and very low frequency behavior (usually within 0.5-40 Hz) that causes various aggressors to be dominant. Therefore, the quality of the extracted EEG signal is dependent on how good the acquisition system can reject these aggressors. Mathematical tools are needed for spectral analysis of EEG signals [5, 6].

So far, monitoring of EEG signals has been limited to clinical applications. However, there is a growing demand for using EEG in non-clinical applications such as human-computer interfaces and gaming. While the main concern for clinical applications is signal quality, the non-clinical applications also require that the biopotential monitoring device should be comfortable, miniaturized and unobtrusive. These improvements to traditional monitoring systems should eventually also favor the autonomy and comfort of the patient in clinical applications.

### 3. Wireless EEG Headband Powered by Body Heat

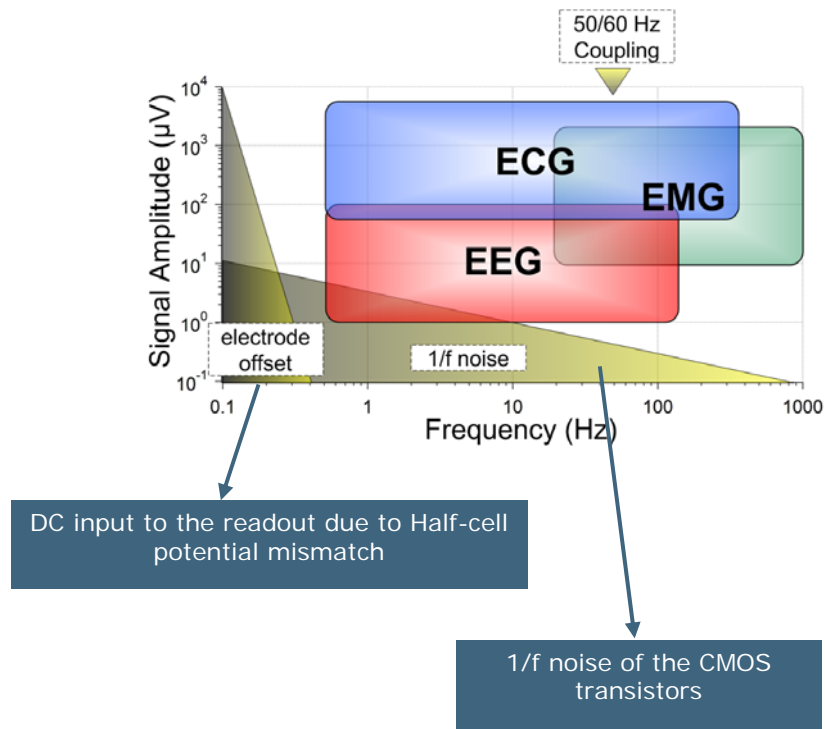
IMEC's wireless autonomous EEG system contains different building blocks as shown in Fig. 4: (1) the thermoelectric generator and power conditioning electronics provide power to the electronics; (2) EEG electrodes and ultra-low EEG amplifiers record the EEG signals from the scalp and (3) the low-power processor (a TI MSP430 microcontroller) and radio (a nRF2401 transceiver) with integrated dipole antenna acquire and transfer the EEG waveform wirelessly to a PC at 2.4 GHz. Below, the most critical blocks are presented in more detail.



**Fig. 4.** Block diagram of the wireless EEG system.

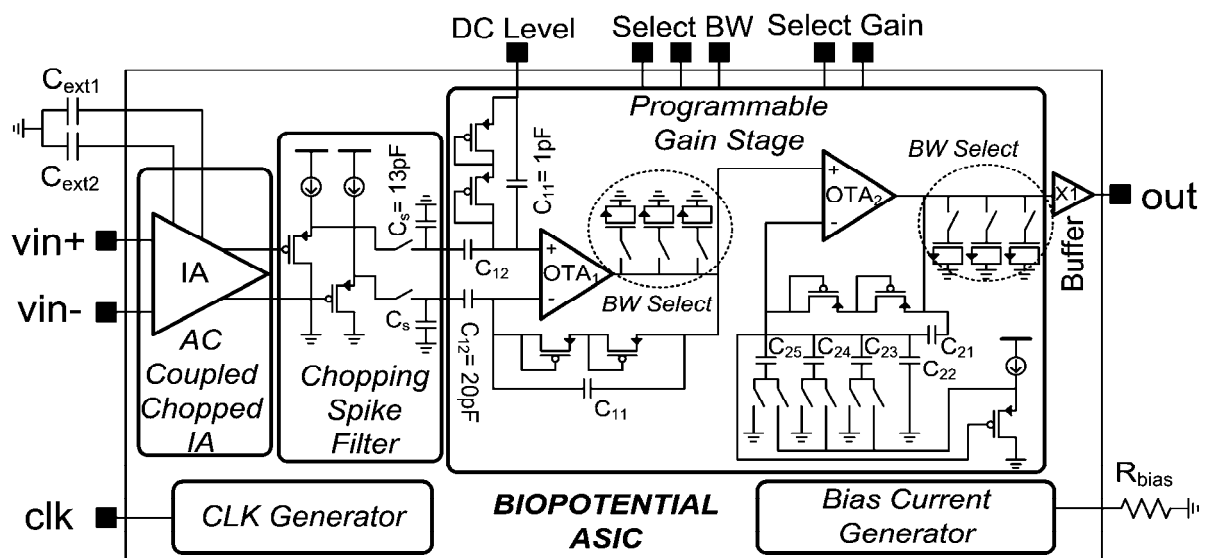
#### 3.1. Two-channel Biopotential Readout Front-end

Practical implementation of an EEG system thermoelectrically powered from the head faces significant difficulties that affect the design of the readout front-end. First, the brain waves are low-frequency signals in the order of microvolts, which appear in the  $1/f$  noise region of typical CMOS transistors. This considerably increases the noise of the readout circuit affecting the signal-to-noise ratio. Next, the polarization voltage of the biopotential electrodes results in a net DC voltage input to the readout circuit that is orders of magnitude larger than the EEG signals. Moreover, the EEG signals are disturbed by large amounts of interference coupled from mains to human body. All these issues can degrade the signal-to-noise ratio of the extracted EEG signal or saturate the readout circuit output. Therefore, the readout circuit should have high common-mode rejection ratio (CMRR) for rejecting the interference from mains, should be AC coupled to the electrodes for filtering the electrode polarization voltage, and should minimize the  $1/f$  noise for improving the signal-to-noise ratio of the extracted EEG signals. Finally, the power consumption of the front-end directly impacts the size of the TEG. Therefore, the readout front-end must consume minimal possible power to make the wearable TEG comfortable and unobtrusive.



**Fig. 5.** Characteristics of biopotential signals (electroencephalogram, electrocardiogram and electromyogram).

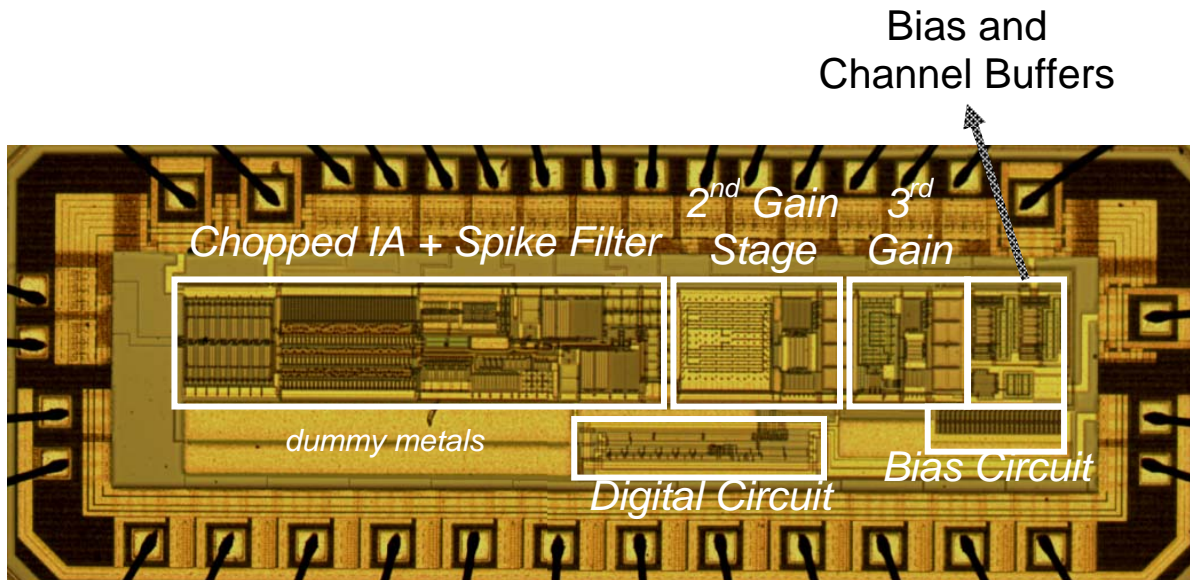
Recently IMEC and Holst Centre have developed a low-power analog readout front-end ASIC that extracts high-quality EEG signals with micro-power consumption (see Fig. 6) [7]. The preamplifier of the readout front-end uses an AC-coupled chopped stabilized instrumentation amplifier (ACCIA). This ACCIA introduces AC coupling to chopper stabilized amplifiers. Thus, it can achieve high CMRR while eliminating both the  $1/f$  noise of CMOS transistors and the differential DC voltage appearing between two biopotential electrodes due to the mismatch of the electrode polarization voltage. The implemented ACCIA consumes only 20  $\mu$ A from 3 V, while achieving 57 nV/ $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$  input referred voltage noise density. The CMRR of the amplifier is above 120 dB.



**Fig. 6.** Architecture of the biopotential readout front-end for the acquisition of EEG signals.

In addition to the ACCIA, the readout front-end includes a digitally programmable gain stage that enables the user to select the most convenient dynamic range and bandwidth depending on the focus of the application. Hence, the system is capable of extracting not only EEG signals, but also electrocardiogram and electromyogram signals.

The ASIC has been implemented in 0.5  $\mu\text{m}$  CMOS technology (Fig. 7). The entire EEG system, which includes two of the readout front-end ASICs, a low-power microcontroller and a low-power radio, is mounted in a stretchable headband. The whole system consumes only 0.8 mW of power.



**Fig. 7.** Analog readout front-end ASIC implemented in 0.5  $\mu\text{m}$  CMOS technology.

The implemented battery-powered version of the wireless EEG acquisition system (excluding the thermoelectric generators) has been compared with a commercial cabled polysomnography (PSG) recording system. In order to perform this comparison, the signals that are extracted from a person simultaneously wearing the commercial PSG system and the system using the ASIC are compared quantitatively in terms of sleep staging during his entire sleep at the hospital. It has been verified that both systems show very close results demonstrating the comparable performance of our system with a commercial mains powered PSG system. In addition, the implemented system clearly has superior autonomy and comfort compared to the commercial PSG system [8, 9].

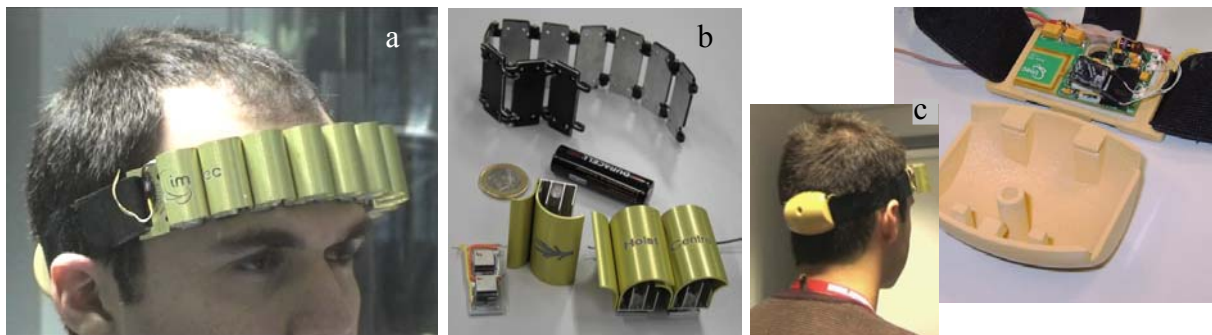
**Table 1.** [table n°2] Performance summary of the biopotential readout front-ends of the EEG.

Voltage Supply	3 V
Current Consumption	20 $\mu\text{A}$
Input Common Mode Range	1.05 V – 1.7 V
Electronic Gain Selection (IA Gain = 10)	390, 800, 1550, 2500
Continuous Gain Adjustment	via $R_2$
Input Referred Voltage Noise Density	57 nV/ $\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$
THD (@ 5 mVpp input and minimum gain)	0.52 %
CMRR (0 mV DEO)	> 120 dB
CMRR (50 mV DEO)	> 110 dB
PSRR + (@ 50Hz)	> 80 dB
PSRR – (@ 50Hz)	> 78 dB
Low Cut-Off Frequency ( $C_{\text{ext}1}=1 \mu\text{F}$ , $C_{\text{ext}2}=22 \text{nF}$ )	0.30 Hz, 14.0 Hz
High Cut-Off Frequency	Electronically Selectable
DC Input Current (@50 mV DEO)	< 0.5 nA



### 3.2. Body-powered EEG Acquisition System

The forehead is a logical location for a TEG on the head because the forehead provides a large heat flow on a large area which is free of thermally isolating hair. (Even with a short haircut, the power produced on hair approximately halves.) To obtain the necessary heat flow, a TEG with a total area of hot plates of  $64 \text{ cm}^2$  has been designed. To fit such a TEG to any user of the device, it was designed as 10 sections of  $1.6 \times 4 \text{ cm}^2$  each, which are rotatable to each other in order to follow the shape of the patient's forehead. The radiators on the outer side of the 2-stage thermopiles (having an aspect ratio of 8.2) ensure effective heat dissipation into ambient air and a satisfactory thermal matching with the environment (see Fig. 8). The TEG is designed for indoor use at ambient temperatures of  $21\text{-}26 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , i.e., around typical temperatures maintained in hospital wards. At  $23 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , the TEG produces approximately  $2\text{-}2.5 \text{ mW}$  or  $30 \pm 2 \text{ } \mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$  [10], which is the theoretical limit of power production on man on average at a thermoelectric quality  $ZT$  of 1 [1,3]. At a temperature of  $19 \text{ }^\circ\text{C}$ , the heat flow increases by about 20% and already exceeds the limit of thermal comfort. Therefore the device becomes cold, one more time confirming a theory.



**Fig. 8.** TEG of the EEG system in a stretchable headband (a), its components compared with an AA battery (b), and the electronic module with low-power EEG readout, signal processing, power conditioning and a transceiver (c).

The output voltage of the thermoelectric generator varies over time, mainly due to fluctuating ambient temperatures. In addition, the radio transmissions occur in bursts, and the generator by itself is not able to provide the resulting peak currents. Therefore, a power-conditioning electronic circuit is included which has the following tasks: (1) short-time energy buffering for peak power demands and for bridging short periods without (sufficient) input power; (2) DC/DC conversion of the generator voltage to a stable and sufficiently high voltage to power the electronics. The power conditioning circuit uses a small supercapacitor as the energy storage element. A charging circuit charges this capacitor from the thermoelectric generator. A DC/DC conversion circuit boosts the varying capacitor voltage to a stable supply voltage of  $2.05 \text{ V}$  for the electronics. A special start-up circuit is implemented to allow proper start-up from the generator even from a fully discharged state without external energy. This makes the EEG system operational in about 40 s after putting the device on. (For commercial systems a rechargeable battery could be added to store all the excess energy that is gained but not used, and keep it for example if the ambient temperature is occasionally too high. Such redistribution of the energy evenly over days or weeks would allow a significant decrease of the TEG size.)

The analog EEG circuitry requires a higher supply voltage ( $2.7\text{-}3.3 \text{ V}$ ). For that purpose a second DC/DC step-up converter provides  $2.75 \text{ V}$  from the  $2.05 \text{ V}$ . Since the EEG circuitry consumes only  $2 \times 20 \text{ } \mu\text{A}$ , this is a significantly more efficient solution than it would be to run the entire system on  $2.75 \text{ V}$ , because the most power-consuming elements in the system, i.e., the radio (approx.  $20 \text{ mA}$

peak) and the processor, can now run on a low supply voltage where they are much more power efficient. The signals crossing the voltage domains require an analog voltage translation circuit to avoid linear operation of digital input transistors which would consume significant leakage current.

To recapitulate, the TEG charges a supercapacitor through the charging circuit; the power conditioning electronics controlled by the startup circuit provides stabilized voltage; the EEG electrodes and ultra-low-power analog EEG readout monitor the brain waves; the low-power processor and the low-power radio with integrated antenna acquire and transfer the EEG waveform wirelessly to a PC at 2.4 GHz. The measured signal bandwidth is 0.3-70 Hz, the sampling rate is 256 Hz per channel and the sampling resolution is 12 bit.

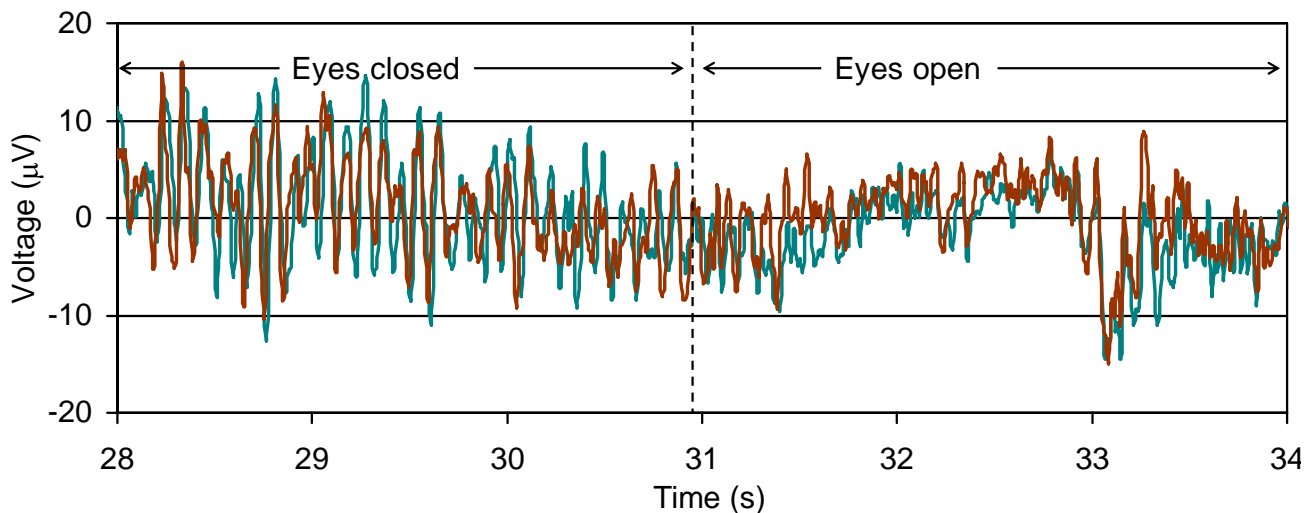


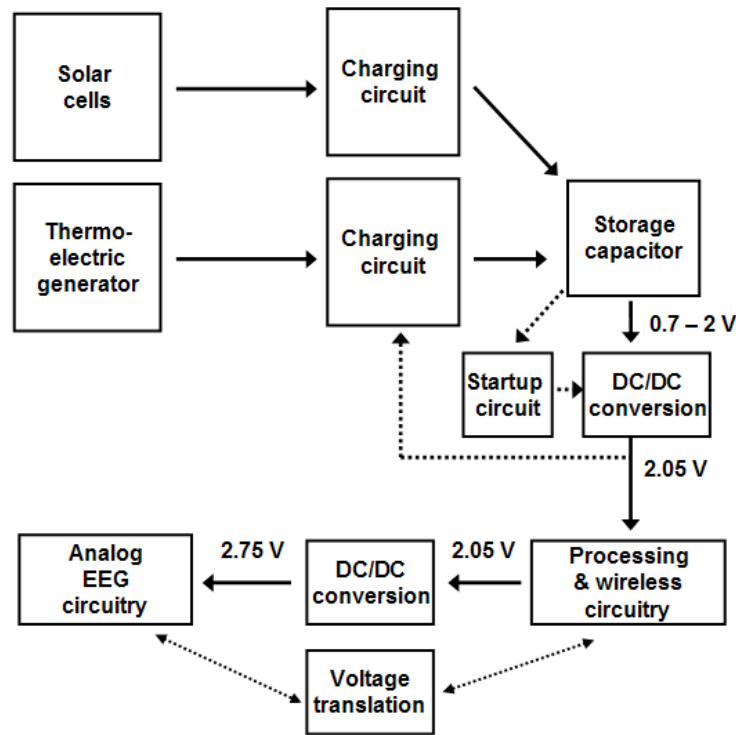
Fig. 9. Transmitted EEG signals in two channels, evoked by opening and closing the eyes.

#### 4. Wireless EEG System Powered by a Hybrid Power Supply

The above concept of the EEG mounted in a headband has been demonstrated to be very effective, both in terms of performance and comfort for its user. It has however some drawbacks. Firstly, it has been designed especially for indoor use in hospitals, where the average temperature is about 22-23 °C. When the ambient temperature is in range of the body temperature, e.g. on a hot summer day or in tropical countries, thermoelectric generators show a dramatic drop in generated power that scales quadratically to the temperature drop on a thermopile. Secondly, the location of the TEG (it has to cover the skin of the forehead to harvest heat), its weight and size still leave room for improvement. After all, the EEG system consumes only 0.8 mW, which is well below the 2-2.5 mW power produced by the TEG. This would allow considerable size reduction. And thirdly, the high fabrication cost of the device, which is determined by the cost of the commercial thermopiles, diminishes its acceptance by a broader industry.

Recently, IMEC and Holst Centre have proposed another solution that copes with these problems (see Fig. 10), i.e., a hybrid power supply. This power supply combines a TEG that uses the heat dissipated from a person's temples and Si photovoltaic cells. The entire battery-free 2-channel EEG system is wearable and integrated into a device resembling headphones. The thermoelectric modules are however not located on the ears, but above them, on hair.





**Fig. 10.** Joint power management circuit for thermoelectric generator and solar cells.

The EEG system uses IMEC's proprietary ultra-low-power biopotential readout ASIC, the same as is used in the headband EEG (see section 3). Again, the whole system consumes only 0.8 mW.

The TEG is composed of six thermoelectric units made up from miniature commercial thermopiles. Each of the two radiators, on left and right sides of the head, has an external area of  $4 \times 8 \text{ cm}^2$  that is made of high-efficiency Si photovoltaic cells. So, the photovoltaic cells, besides converting ambient light into electricity, additionally serve as a part of the radiator and as such ensure an effective heat transfer from the head into the environment through convection and radiation. Since the TEG is to be positioned on a person's hair, thermally conductive comb-type structures (so-called thermal shunts) have been used to eliminate the thermal barrier between the skin and the thermopiles caused by the person's hair.

The photovoltaic cells have been fabricated at IMEC on p-type float zone (FZ) monocrystalline Si substrates. A standard industrial fabrication process was slightly adapted to obtain increased solar cell efficiencies in comparison with state-of-the-art industrial type monocrystalline Si solar cells (typical 15-16 % efficiency). The sequence of process steps consists of protecting the substrate back side and texturing the front end using random pyramid formation; industrial type of emitter formation using  $\text{POCl}_3$ , adapted to obtain a thinner and lower doped emitter; Si nitride front-surface passivation; Al screenprinting at the back and firing (to realize a back surface field that enables passivation of the back surface); lithography to define the front-side finger pattern; front-side metallization and contact sintering. Subsequently, the substrate has been sawed into  $2 \times 3 \text{ cm}^2$  and  $2 \times 2 \text{ cm}^2$  solar cells. In comparison with a standard industrial type process, the application of random pyramids and lithography defined front-side finger pattern on a FZ substrate have enabled an enhanced efficiency of about 17%. Using lithography to define the front-side finger pattern enables much smaller metal lines and hence less metal coverage of the solar cell, resulting in a higher current than obtained with traditionally used screenprinted patterns. The cells are interconnected in the device in a checkmate way in two parallel circuits. This allowed obtaining an almost perfect dependence of power versus direction

of light: while the wearer makes a complete turn around him/herself in direct sunlight, the power output varies only within 5 %.

The hybrid power supply provides more than 1 mW on average in most circumstances, which is more than enough for the targeted application. The absolute and relative input power gained from the thermoelectric and photovoltaic power supplies constantly changes, reflecting variations in illumination and in heat transfer from the head. E.g., the power generated by the solar cells was 45 mW as measured in direct sunlight near noon, whereas a power of 0.2 mW was measured in the office, far from the window on a cloudy day. The thermopiles provide more uniform power than the solar cells. At 21.8 °C, indoor, they generate 1.5 mW, while outdoor, at 9.5 °C with no wind, the power increases to 5.5 mW. As tested down to an ambient temperature of 7 °C, the device is very comfortable for the user. As a rule of thumb, outdoor solar cells generated 8 times more power at 9.5 °C than thermopiles while indoor, the latter produced 8 times more power than solar cells in the office.

By using a two-way power supply that exploits both the heat dissipated from a person's temples and ambient light as energy sources, the dimensions (size and weight) of the TEG could be reduced with respect to the previous demonstrator, and the highest power/volume ratio is obtained. Moreover, the location on the hair is much more convenient for the user, according to responses. This further increases the patient's quality of life. Compared to the previous demonstrator, the EEG system works more reliably at high ambient temperatures such as 28 °C. Finally, using less thermopiles reduces the cost of the device, even if high-efficiency (more expensive) solar cells are used.

The portable headset (Fig. 11) allows providing a look at the brain in environments it has not been studied in before. E.g., it can be used to study sleep in people's own bedrooms instead of in hospital wards where sleep patterns can be disturbed. Or, cars able to track the brainwaves of drivers can reduce people's mental workload at times of stress by responding to brain states. A portable headset could make that possible. It could also be used to monitor patients at risk of seizure or, in future, as an interface for computer games. At least, thinking "yes" or "no" can be already differentiated [6].



**Fig. 11.** Wearable wireless EEG system with hybrid power supply.

The new EEG acquisition ASIC of IMEC is expected to further improve the systems functionality and reduce the power dissipation [11]. On the level of a TEG, new approaches for the thermopile fabrication using microelectronic technologies are targeted, mainly for reasons of cost reduction [12 -

15]. Several routes are being explored. Firstly, micromachined thermopiles are considered as a cost-effective breakthrough solution. Theoretically, a 1 cm<sup>2</sup> die with a micromachined thermopile replacing the thermopiles in above devices may provide almost the same power and much larger voltage than the above TEGs. IMEC and Holst Centre are currently investigating the use of BiTe and poly-SiGe micromachined thermopiles. Alternatively, the development of membrane-type thermopiles is ongoing [16].

## 5. Conclusions

We have demonstrated that TEGs on living beings, if designed accounting for the thermal properties of the latter reach high performance characteristics and the ability to power a variety of wireless autonomous smart sensors. Several prototypes for various applications have been fabricated. Focus of this article was on a self-powered wireless wearable EEG sensor. The TEG located on the forehead produces about 30  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$ , which is the theoretical limit of power production on man on average. This is more than enough to power the 2-channel ultra-low-power EEG system (consuming only 0.8 mW of power). An alternative EEG system has been developed, worn in a way similar to headphones and powered by both body heat and ambient light. This design is useful for both indoor and outdoor conditions and, through its reduced size and weight, increases the patient's quality of life. Further research targets at a significant reduction in the production cost of film-based thermopiles by using modern microelectronic and MEMS technologies.

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## Online Registration:

[http://www.sensorsportal.com/HTML/SSSD\\_Course\\_2008.htm](http://www.sensorsportal.com/HTML/SSSD_Course_2008.htm)

## Deadline for Registration:

**31 October, 2008**



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