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(71) Applicant: **ZIH Corp.**
Hamilton HM 08 (BM)

(72) Inventors:
- **Smolenski, Lawrence Edward**
  Newbury Park, CA 91320 (US)
- **Severance, Philip Ross**
  Westlake Village, CA 91361 (US)
- **Ehrhardt, Robert**
  Palatine, IL 60067 (US)
- **Schwan, Martin**
  Chicago, IL 60622 (US)
- **Mastinick, Philip Alan**
  Camarillo, CA 93010-9288 (US)
- **Brabander, Christopher**
  Santa Anna, CA 92704 (US)

(74) Representative: **Wihlsson, Joakim Per Magnus**
Bjerkéns Patentbyra KB,
Östermalmsgatan 58
114 50 Stockholm (SE)

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(54) Self calibrating media edge sensor

(57) Various edge detection arrangements are disclosed, including an edge detection method and arrangement that utilizes outputs of commonly illuminated reference and edge sensors as the inputs for a comparator. The reference sensor is configured to have a wide field of view and the edge sensor is configured to have a narrow, high gain, field of view. Therefore, the reference sensor has a broad signal response to an edge passage and the edge sensor a steep and narrow signal response. When the two signals are biased to cross each other, the comparator output changes state, indicating passage of an edge. Because the reference sensor provides a base signal level directly related to the real time illumination level that the edge sensor also receives, the reference sensor provides a switch point along the transition ramp of the edge sensor that integrates a majority of the random error sources.

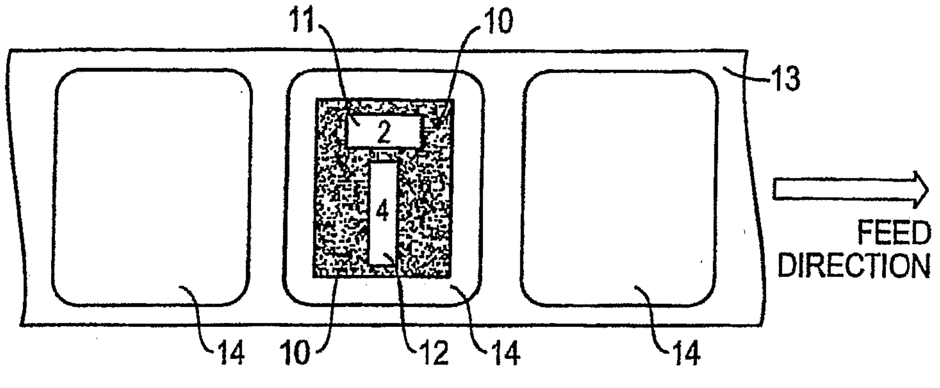


FIG. 4A

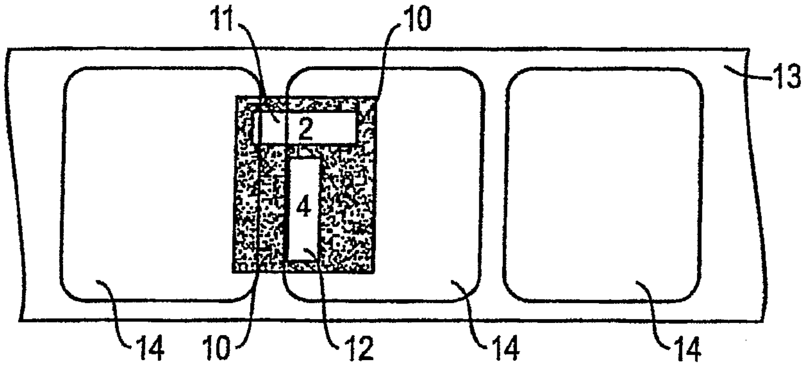


FIG. 4B

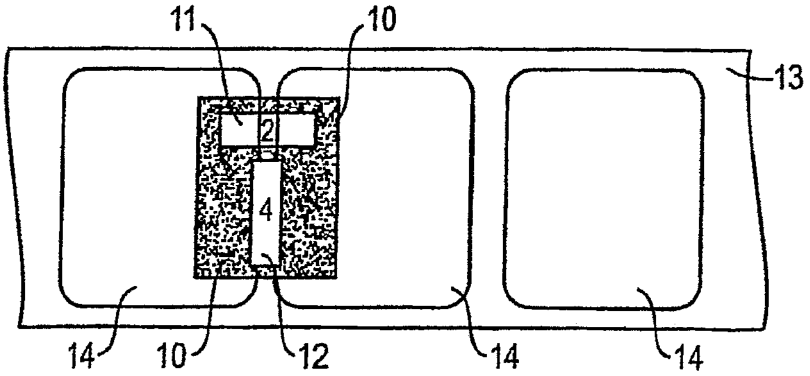


FIG. 4C

Description

BACKGROUND OF INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to media sensors. More specifically, the present invention provides methods and arrangements for media edge sensors useful, for example, in a label printer.

2. Description of Related Art

[0002] Edge detection is used for identifying the passage of leading and or trailing edges of media as a means for counting and or accurate spatial registration of operations to be performed upon desired areas of the media. For example, label printers pass an array of labels releasably adhered to a support web past a printhead. An emitter and a detector pair are positioned on either side of the support web to detect changes in the web transmissivity between areas of the web covered by a label and the areas of uncovered web between each label. When the transmissivity changes from high to low or vice versa, a signal is transmitted to the printer processor indicating that a label edge has been detected. Thereby, accurate spatial orientation of printed indicia upon each label is enabled.

[0003] Some prior edge sensors have used an aperture to localize the emitter output and or mask the detector as a means for increasing the rate of change between a high transmissivity and a low transmissivity state, as a label edge passes the detector. As shown in figure 1, because of light scattering that occurs in the web, even if an aperture is used, a sharply defined transition does not occur. Noise generated in part by the presence of paper fibers or other non-uniformities in the web and or labels introduces a further random error to the detector by varying the point, relative to the actual edge location, at which a preset transition threshold signal level is detected.

[0004] The emitter, detector, aperture and their precise placement with respect to each other introduces further opportunity for variability of the sensor response characteristics. Performance characteristics of sensor components may vary batch to batch as the different components are received from a single or multiple suppliers and over time as component sensitivity and or output levels degrade. Further, environmental fouling of the emitter, aperture and or detector will degrade sensor circuit response characteristics over time.

[0005] Alternatively, edge detection may be performed by illuminating the back of the web and detecting the reflectivity changes caused by passage of, for example, a black mark placed on the back of the web, relative to a label edge. Black marks may also be used to indicate approach of a media run-out condition. However, reflectivity and diffusion variances in the web and or printed marks can still create similar signal response random error characteristics as noted above. Furthermore, different placements and performance characteristics of sensor components from batch to batch, and environmental fouling of such components over time, can also still degrade sensor circuit response characteristics.

[0006] Nonetheless, users expect label and other such printers and devices to function with a wide range of different media and support web combinations having a wide range of transmissivity and or light scattering characteristics. Therefore, it is an object of the present invention to provide methods and apparatuses that overcome such deficiencies in the prior art.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF DRAWINGS

[0007] The accompanying drawings, which are incorporated in and constitute a part of this specification, illustrate embodiments of the invention and, together with a general description of the invention given above, and the detailed description of the embodiments given below, serve to explain the principles of the invention.

Figure 1 is a representative signal response chart for a typical prior art emitter/aperture/detector media edge transmissivity sensing configuration.

Figure 2 is a simplified electrical schematic of a first embodiment of the invention.

Figure 3 is a schematic view of an aperture mask.

Figure 4a is a schematic top view representation of the aperture mask of Figure 3, relative to a web showing a condition during media feed where both apertures are covered by a label.

Figure 4b is a schematic top view representation of the aperture mask of Figure 3, relative to a web showing a condition during media feed where the reference aperture is exposed to a label edge, but the edge aperture is not.

Figure 4c is a schematic top view representation of the aperture mask of Figure 3, relative to a web showing a condition during media feed where both apertures are ex-posed to a label edge.

Figure 5 is a representative signal response chart for an edge sensing circuit according to a first embodiment of the invention.

Figure 6 is a simplified electrical schematic of a first embodiment of the invention with emitter current feed-back control.

Figure 7 is a representative signal response chart for an edge sensing circuit according to a first embodiment of the invention with emitter current feedback control.

Figure 8A is a schematic side view representation of the invention component positioning for a second embodiment, relative to a web.

Figure 8B is a schematic side view representation of the invention component positioning for a third embodiment, relative to a web.

Figure 9 is a representative signal response chart for an edge sensing circuit according to a second embodiment of the invention in black mark detecting mode.

Figure 10 illustrates a media edge detection arrangement positioned along a feed path defined by a printer in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 11 illustrates an output voltage profile as a function of emitter current corresponding to the translucence profile of a given media type.

Figure 12 show a high level block diagram of a media edge detection arrangement in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 13 is a simplified electrical schematic of the signal conditioning module of Figure 12 in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 14 illustrates how the virtual ground offset voltage and the corresponding on-to-off duty cycle that will generate this offset voltage, can be calculated for a given media, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 15 shows a media sensor calibration logic diagram for determining the virtual ground offset voltage and corresponding on-to-off duty cycle that will generate this offset voltage for a given media, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 16 illustrates a first set of possible scenarios associated with determining the virtual ground offset voltage and corresponding offset duty cycle for a given media type, where Position A is on a label and Position B is on a gap, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 17 illustrates a second set of possible scenarios associated with determining the virtual ground offset voltage and corresponding offset duty cycle for a given media type, where Position A is on a gap and Position B is on a label, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 18 shows a high level block diagram of a media edge detection arrangement using a collimated laser, such as a vertical cavity surface emitting laser (VCSEL), in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

Figure 19 illustrates a peel bar assembly that includes a media edge detection arrangement in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] The present invention seeks to provide media edge detection arrangements which function with a wide range of different media and support web combinations having a wide range of transmissivity and or light scattering characteristics.

[0009] In one embodiment of the present invention, an edge detector for detecting passage of media transition edges of a moving web which change the energy transmissivity of the web is described that includes a first emitter positioned to emit energy through the web towards a reference sensor and an edge sensor; the reference sensor having a reference sensor output corresponding to an energy level received from the first emitter; the edge sensor having an edge sensor output corresponding to an energy level received from the first emitter; the reference sensor having a broader field of view than the edge sensor in the direction of the advancing media; and the reference sensor output and the edge sensor output coupled to a comparator having a first output when the reference sensor output is greater than the edge sensor output and a second output when the reference sensor output is less than the edge sensor output, wherein a transition between the first and second outputs of the comparator marks the passage of a media transition edge.

[0010] In another embodiment of the present invention, an edge detector for detecting passage of media transition edges of a moving web which change the energy transmissivity of the web is described that includes an emitter located proximate a reference sensor and an edge sensor whereby energy emitted from the emitter is reflected by the web towards the reference sensor and the edge sensor; the reference sensor having a reference sensor output corresponding to an energy level received from the emitter; the edge sensor having an edge sensor output corresponding to an energy level received from the emitter; the reference sensor having a broader field of view than the edge sensor in the direction of the advancing media; and the reference sensor output and the edge sensor output coupled to a comparator having a first output when the reference sensor output is greater than the edge sensor output and a second output when the reference sensor output is less than the edge sensor output, wherein a transition between the first and second outputs of the comparator marks the passage of a media transition edge.

[0011] In yet another embodiment of the present invention, a method for detecting a media edge in a media path is described that includes the steps of adjusting a reference sensor to have a broader field of view with respect to the media path than an edge sensor; illuminating the edge sensor and the reference sensor across the media path; and comparing an output of the edge sensor with an output of the reference sensor.

[0012] In yet another embodiment of the present invention, a system and method for detecting passage of transition edges of a moving web which change the energy transmissivity of the web is described that includes an emitter positioned to emit energy through the web towards a sensor; the sensor having a sensor output corresponding to an energy level received from the emitter; a signal conditioning module for amplifying and shifting the sensor output from the sensor so as to normalize the sensor output to a certain range of levels for detection; an edge sensing module for controlling detection of transition edges in the web, the detection based at least in part on the normalized sensor output of the signal conditioning module; and a processor that is connected to communicate with the signal conditioning module and the edge sensing module, the processor configured for: determining, based at least in part on the normalized sensor output of the signal conditioning module, a label signal level and an inter-label gap signal level corresponding, respectively, to a label portion and an inter-label gap portion of the web; setting a label/inter-label gap threshold between the label and inter-label gap signal levels; and detecting when the normalized sensor output of the signal conditioning module crosses the label/inter-label gap threshold.

[0013] In still another embodiment of the present invention, a system for detecting passage of transition edges of a moving web which change the energy transmissivity of the web is described that includes a collimated light source, such as a vertical cavity surface emitting laser (VCSEL) or side emitting laser positioned to emit energy through the web towards a sensor; the sensor having a sensor output corresponding to an energy level received from the emitter; a signal conditioning module for normalizing the sensor output to a certain range of levels for detection; an edge sensing module for controlling detection of transition edges in the web, the detection based at least in part on the normalized sensor output of the signal conditioning module; and a processor connected to communicate with the signal conditioning module and the edge sensing module, the processor configured for: determining, based at least in part on the normalized sensor output of the signal conditioning module, a label signal level and an inter-label gap signal level corresponding, respectively, to a label portion and an inter-label gap portion of the web; setting a label/inter-label gap threshold between the label and inter-label gap signal levels; and detecting when the normalized sensor output of the signal conditioning module crosses the label/inter-label gap threshold.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

[0014] The present invention now will be described more fully hereinafter with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which some, but not all embodiments of the invention are shown. Indeed, this invention may be embodied in many different forms and should not be construed as limited to the embodiments set forth herein; rather, these embodiments are provided so that this disclosure will satisfy applicable legal requirements. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout.

[0015] The present invention utilizes outputs of commonly illuminated reference and edge sensors as the inputs for a comparator. The reference sensor is configured to have a wide field of view and the edge sensor is configured to have a narrow, high gain, field of view. Therefore, the reference sensor has a broad signal response to an edge passage and the edge sensor a steep and narrow signal response. When the two signals are biased to cross each other, the comparator output changes state, indicating passage of an edge. Because the reference sensor provides a base signal level directly related to the real time illumination level that the edge sensor also receives, the reference sensor provides a switch point along the transition ramp of the edge sensor that integrates a majority of the random error sources. Therefore, the comparator output is self-calibrating for a wide range of different media transmissivities, the presence, on average, of embedded fibers within the web and varying sensor component output and or sensitivity.

[0016] A first embodiment of the invention uses an energy emitter that illuminates, through the media, a reference sensor 2 and an edge sensor 4. A simplified electrical schematic of the sensor circuit is shown in Figure 2. The reference sensor 2 and the edge sensor 4 sense the first emitter 6 output passing through the web between each label. The output of each sensor is input to a comparator 8 that switches state when the edge signal level exceeds the reference signal level. To ensure that the steady state "high" reference signal level is below the edge signal "high" level, a bias may be introduced via modifications to the aperture dimensions and or adjusting components. In one embodiment, as illustrated in Figure 2, the bias may be introduced by adjusting a pair of pull-down resistor values so that R1 is larger than R2. More generally, however, the bias can be introduced in a variety of ways including deliberate sensor mismatching, differences in corresponding parts (e.g., pull-down resistor values, etc.) or other bias sources. Also, when using A/D converter(s), for example, the bias can be introduced in the related software. The bias, which can be introduced in any of these ways, as well as others not currently listed, helps to eliminate spurious output when both sensors 2, 4 see label only.

[0017] As shown by Figure 3, a mask 10 with a reference aperture 11 arranged perpendicular to an edge aperture 12 may be used to provide the reference sensor 2 with a wide view and the edge sensor 4 with a narrow, high gain, view of the first emitter 6 output passing through the web 13. Alternatively, the apertures 11,12 may be formed in mask(s) individual to each sensor 2,4. Also, the masks may be integrated with each sensor, and the sensors mounted so that the apertures 11,12 are perpendicular to each other. Where the first emitter 6 is an infrared or visible light emitting diode (LED), the reference sensor 2 and the edge sensor 4 may be, for example, photo transistors or photo diodes. Alternatively, any form of energy emitter and corresponding sensors capable of generating output signals proportional to the energy levels received may be used.

[0018] As the media 13 moves past the reference sensor 2, and edge sensor 4 (both covered by mask 10), when both sensors are covered by a label 14, as shown in Figure 4a, both sensors will have a low output level, the reference sensor 2 having a low level biased to be above that of the edge sensor 4. As a space between label(s) 14 approaches the sensors 2,4, as shown in Figure 4b, the reference aperture 11 aligned parallel to the feed direction, becomes illuminated before the edge aperture 12 whereby the reference sensor 2 output rises before a significant increase occurs at the edge sensor 4. When the edge aperture 12 is finally illuminated, as shown in Figure 4c, the edge sensor 4 output level rises quickly, passing through the signal level of the reference sensor 2, triggering the comparator 8 to change state and signal the processor that an edge has been detected. The signal level progression, with respect to the media location is shown in chart form in Figure 5.

[0019] An increased range of media transmissivities usable with the system, as well as compensation for lowered LED light output that may occur over time may be built into the sensor circuit, to a certain extent, by linking the reference sensor output to the current level delivered to the first emitter 6 LED. As shown in Figure 6, the reference sensor 2 output may be tied to a transistor 16. If the reference sensor 2 output decreases, transistor 16 increases the current to the first emitter 6 LED. The additional closed loop of this arrangement modifies the overall signal level progression, as shown in Figure 7, but the end result output from the comparator 8 to the printer processor is the same.

[0020] A second embodiment of the invention is selectable between dual modes. In a first mode, the circuit operates as described above, monitoring web transmissivity changes resulting from spaces between labels. In a second mode, the circuit monitors web reflectivity changes resulting from passage of black mark(s) 20 placed on the back side of the web. As shown in Figure 8A, to add the second mode, a second emitter 18 is located proximate the edge sensor 2 and the reference sensor 4 to illuminate the sensor side of the web 13. If closed loop feedback is used for the first emitter 6 supply current level as described herein above, the second emitter 18 may be similarly configured.

[0021] A third embodiment of the invention includes a "reflective-only" version. As shown in Figure 8B, this embodiment does not require the presence of the emitter 6. Thus, rather than being selectable between dual modes, the circuit need only be configured to monitor web reflectivity changes resulting from the passage of black mark(s) 20 placed on the back side of the web. To do so, the emitter 18, as shown in Figure 8B, is located proximate the edge sensor 2 and the reference sensor 4 to illuminate the sensor side of the web 13. As with the other embodiments, closed loop feedback can be used for the emitter 18 supply current level as described herein above.

[0022] With the circuit in black mark detecting mode, the first emitter 6 is disabled and the second emitter 18 is energized. As shown by the signal level progression in Figure 9, the circuit operates with an inverted steady state as both the reference sensor 2 and the edge sensor 4 receive the second emitter 18 output reflection from the web, causing elevated reference sensor 2 and edge sensor 4 outputs. When a black mark 20 approaches, the resulting lowered reflection from the web is first detected by the wider viewing reference sensor 2 causing a drop in the reference sensor

2 output level. When the black mark 20 reaches the view of the edge sensor 4, the edge sensor 4 output drops below the level of the reference sensor 2, and the comparator 8 changes state to indicate detection of the black mark 20. Here also, the reference sensor 2 generates a base signal level directly related to the real time illumination level that the edge sensor 4 also receives, providing a switch point along the transition ramp of the edge sensor 4 that integrates a majority of the random error sources. Therefore, the comparator 8 output is self-calibrating for different media 13 reflectivities and second emitter 18 output variances.

[0023] One skilled in the art will appreciate that the reference and edge sensors may be arranged with or without apertures and in different orientations with respect to each other. Similarly, rather than using apertures as filters for the emitter output, cylinder lenses may be used to shape the emitter output directed to each sensor. According to the invention, it is only necessary that one of the two sensors react to the approach of a transition edge before the other so that it may assume a signal output level which the other will traverse, providing a self calibrating signal level transition which a comparator then operates upon.

[0024] The self-calibrating media edge sensor arrangement described above has been demonstrated in detail with respect to a label printer. However, other applications of the invention will be readily apparent to one skilled in the art for many types of media having a moving web with transition edges including, for example, photographic negative frame detection and or monitoring of alignment indicia used in offset web printing processes.

[0025] Further, the self-calibrating media edge sensor arrangement described above has been demonstrated with respect to a semiconductor comparator element. One skilled in the art will appreciate that a comparator function according to the invention may also be achieved, for example, through the use of A/D converter(s) and logical comparison of the signal levels within a computer processor. In one embodiment, the comparator can include a pair of A/D converters, one of which is used for sampling the output of the reference sensor and the other for sampling the output of edge sensor. The comparator can further include a processor coupled to the pair of A/D converters which generates either a first output or a second output by logically comparing the outputs of the A/D converters. In another embodiment, the comparator can include a single A/D converter with a multiplexer used for taking alternate readings from each of the reference sensor and the edge sensor. A processor coupled to such A/D converter can then be used to generate either a first output or a second output by logically comparing respective reference sensor and edge sensor readings taken by the A/D converter.

[0026] Thus, the media edge sensor arrangement described above provides an extremely accurate self calibrating edge detection circuit comprising a minimal number of physical components and little or no requirement for host logical processing overhead.

[0027] Other media edge sensor arrangements are also contemplated by the present invention. As indicated above, transmissive media sensors allow a printer, or other such device, to determine the start of each label for vertical image registration, and to determine when the media supply has been exhausted. Transmissive media sensors work with media of two general types: opaque (or nearly opaque) media with notches or holes, and partially opaque media with areas of less opacity between labels. Examples of these two types of media are card stock with notches, and die cut labels on a continuous liner. The opacity profile of the first type of media as it moves through the sensor is 100 % opacity during the label with short periods of 0 % opacity during the notch or hole. The opacity profile of the second type of media as it moves through the sensor is some opacity amount (A%) during the label with short periods of less opacity (B%) during the inter label gap. In both types, the opacity seen by the sensor is 0 % when the media is exhausted. The ranges of the opacities, A% and B%, can be very wide (e.g. from nearly 0 % to 100 %), and the range of difference between label and gap opacity (A%-B%) can also be wide.

[0028] Media edge sensor configurations in accordance with the present invention can be used in a wide variety of devices including various types of thermal printers. For instance, Figure 10 shows a typical example of a label printer 30 having a feed path **32,** which is of a type that could be used in accordance with the present invention. Specifically, the label printer **30** is a direct thermal transfer printer where no ribbon is required. As is known in the art, printing is performed by selective heating of a printhead element on the media to create the image applied to each label. In this printer, a roll of media **13** (not shown) is placed on the spindles **34** and is fed through the adjustable guides **36** and over the platen roller **38.** The printer further includes a printhead **54** for printing on the media **13** when, in operation, the cover is closed so the printhead is brought into contact with the media as the media lays over the platen **38.** The platen **38** advances the media **13** while the printhead **54** selectively heats the media to produce the image applied to each label.

[0029] To monitor the opacity profile of the media **13** moving along the feed path **32,** the printer **30** further includes an emitter **76,** a sensor (or detector) **78** and a main logic board **80** having a signal processing system **82** (not shown). Although this configuration is shown in use with labels, it could also be used with cards and other types of stock for sensing card edges and other such media features. In general, the sensor **78** can be located anywhere along the feed path **32** between the media role (on the spindles **34**) and the platen **38.** In the printer of Figure 10, the sensor **78** is positioned along the feed path **32** between the guides 36 and the platen **38,** while the emitter **76** is positioned in the lid or cover of the printer **30.**

[0030] In one embodiment, the emitter **76** is a light emitting diode (LED) that emits infrared energy towards the sensor **78.** The sensor **78** will produce output voltage signals in response to the opacity profile of the media **13** passing before it. For example, Figure 11 illustrates an output voltage profile of the sensor **78,** as a function of emitter current (or intensity), corresponding to the translucence profile of a given media **13** moving along the feed path **32.** In this example, the type of media **13** moving along the feed path **32** includes die cut labels on a continuous liner, and has three distinct opacity levels along its translucence profile: "label," "inter-label gap" and "media out." As illustrated in Figure 11, each of these opacity levels generally corresponds to a different respective output voltage level for a given emitter intensity.

[0031] With proper adjustment of the emitter current, the media opacity profile will produce sensor output signals that can be discriminated by the signal processing system **82** on the main logic board **80.** Thus, the ability of the system to vary the emitter current (intensity) of the emitter **76** provides one degree of control over producing a desired output voltage profile for a particular media **13.** Additional degrees of control are achieved using the signal processing system **82,** as described below.

[0032] Figure 12 shows a high-level block diagram of a media edge detection arrangement **90** in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. The arrangement **90** includes a signal processing system **82** having a signal conditioning module **92,** an edge-sensing module **94** and a processor **96.** Under control of the processor **96,** the signal conditioning module **92** is used for normalizing the sensor output signal to a certain range of levels for detection, and the edge sensing module **94** is used to provide the logic for detecting media transition events within such normalized output signal. These aspects of the present invention are described in detail below. The processor **96** can also be used to perform a number of other functions including controlling the operation of the emitter **76** via an emitter control circuit **98.** The emitter **76** is positioned to transmit a beam of light through the media **13** towards the sensor **78.** The output of the sensor **78** can be fed through a filtering module **100,** which may include a notch filter used for hooking signals within a certain frequency range while filtering out ambient light and other noise that might be detected. An amplifier 102 may also be included for amplifying the signal after it has been filtered. The signal is then provided to the signal processing system **82** for media edge detection processing.

[0033] For a given emitter current, the sensor **78** will produce output voltage signals in response to the opacity profile of the media **13** passing through it. The output voltage signals from the sensor **78** can be analyzed by the signal processing system **82.** By setting thresholds between the signal levels that correspond to the label(s) **104** and to the inter-label gap (s) **106** (or notch(s)), the processor **96** can determine when these points in the media **13** pass through the sensor **78.** In one embodiment, there is a fixed distance from the sensing point of the sensor **78** to the print line of the printhead **54.** Assuming the media **13** does not slip, there are also a fixed number of motor steps between the sensor **78** and the print line as well. As a result, the processor **96** can coordinate the start of printing for a label **104** with the number of motor steps that have been made since the start of the label passed through the sensor **78.**

[0034] As indicated above, the processor **96** can also be configured to vary the power to the emitter **76** as one degree of control over producing a desired output signal level from the sensor **78.** There are many methods by which a microprocessor can generate and control the current, and therefore power, through an LED, including any number of Digital-to-Analog converters. One skilled in the art of electrical design will recognize one such method is to supply the LED with current from a digitally controlled DC voltage source through a fixed source resistance. Low-pass filtering a pulse-width-modulated digital control signal using a low output impedance, active filter can be used to create a digitally controlled DC voltage source. This method is assumed below, with Di, used to represent the On-to-Off duty cycle of the microprocessor control signal that is low-pass-filtered to generate the LED Current.

[0035] For the die-cut label media type, the emitter current is set to maximize the signal difference between the label **104** and inter-label gap **106** without driving the inter-label gap signal too close to the media out signal level. The signal processing system **82** then sets a threshold for the label/inter-label gap boundary between the label and inter-label gap signal levels, and sets a media out threshold between the inter-label gap and no media present signal levels. For notched opaque media, the current in the emitter **76** is set high enough for the sensor's output to be at a maximum level with no media **13** present, and low enough for the output to be at its minimum when the label 104 is present. In this case, since there is no opacity difference between a notch and media out, the processor **96** must measure the width of all notches and assume the media **13** is out when a notch exceeds the maximum specified notch width by some margin.

[0036] Figure 13 shows a simplified electrical schematic of the signal-conditioning module **92** of Figure 12, in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. At a high level, the signal-conditioning module **92** is used for amplifying and shifting the sensor **78** output signals such that they fill and are centered within a desired portion of the input range of the processor **96**'s Analog-to-Digital converter (not shown). In the embodiment of Figure 13, the signal conditioning module **92** is a variable gain amplifier with microprocessor controlled gain and DC offset adjustments. The input to the signal conditioning module, "Vin" (or V_I), is the output of the sensor **78** (after any preliminary filtering and/or amplification that may be performed by modules **100** and **102**), and the output of the signal conditioning module, "Vout" (or V_O), is the input of the processor **96**'s Analog-to-Digital (A-to-D) converter. As would be readily understood by one of ordinary skill in the art, the output of the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** shown in Figure 13 can be represented as follows: Vout = [(Vin - Voffset)*(1 + R1/R2*Dgain)] + Voffset, where Voffset (or V_{OS}) is the "virtual ground" offset voltage, and Dgain is the microprocessor-controlled on-to-off duty cycle of the switch (SW).

[0037] As indicated by this equation, the gain term of the amplifier shown in Figure 13 is governed by, Gain = 1 +

(R1/R2)*Dgain, where Dgain is the microprocessor-controlled on-to-off duty cycle of the gain-controlling PWM (Pulse-Width-Modulated) signal for the switch (SW), R1 is the feedback resistance, and R2 is the total resistance from the negative opamp input terminal to virtual ground (Voffset). Therefore, Dgain = (Gain - 1)/(R1/R2). As will be described below, both Voffset and Dgain provide means for controlling the output of the signal conditioning module **92,** which, in turn, provides means for controlling the inputs provided to the edge sensing module **94** and the processor **96.** There are many methods by which a microprocessor can generate and control a reference voltage such as Voffset, including any number of Digital-to-Analog converters. One skilled in the art of electrical design will recognize one such method is to low-pass filter a pulse-width-modulated digital control signal using a low output impedance, active filter. This method is assumed below, with De, used to represent the On-to-Off duty cycle of the microprocessor control signal that is low-pass-filtered to generate the virtual ground reference, Voffset.

[0038] For example, using firmware on the main logic board **80,** the signal-conditioning module **92** can be used to produce a desired output signal, Vout, by controlling one or both of the virtual ground offset voltage, Voffset, and the on-to-off duty cycle, Dgain, of the switch, SW. In particular, by using the processor **96** to control these two parameters (Voffset and Dgain), the signal-conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** can be used to both amplify and shift the sensor **78** output signals such that they fill and are centered within a desired portion of the input range of the processor **96**'s A-to-D converter. Thus, in addition to the degree of control provided by varying the intensity of the emitter **76,** as described above, the present invention also provides two additional degrees of control over shaping the opacity profile seen by the edge sensing module **94** and the processor **96,** for a given media **13.** Using these parameters as a means for amplifying and/or shifting the opacity profile of a given media **13** to fit within a desired portion of the input range of the processor **96**'s A-to-D converter, allows for optimum detection of media transition events.

[0039] Figure 14 illustrates how the virtual ground offset voltage, Voffset, and the corresponding on-to-off duty cycle, Doffset, of the pulse-width-modulated signal that will generate this offset voltage, can be calculated for a given media **13**, whose opacity profile is to be fit within a desired portion of the input range of the processor **96**'s A-to-D converter. Referring to Figure 14, V_1 and V_2 represent actual sensor voltages taken at a label portion and an inter-label gap portion, respectively, of the media **13** prior to being processed by the signal-conditioning module **92** (i.e., these voltages correspond to Vin in Figure 13). Target_V1 (or V_{T1}) and Target_V2 (or V_{T2}), on the other hand, represent the desired output voltages that correspond to V_1 and V_2, respectively. Stated differently, Target_V1 and Target_V2 define a desired range of output voltage levels (from the signal conditioning module **92**) that fall within the operational input range of the processor **96**'s A-to-D converter, but that correspond to the actual input voltage spread (V_1 - V_2) between the label and inter-label gap portions of the media **13**.

[0040] Thus, it is a goal of the signal conditioning module **92** to take the actual input voltage spread (V_1 - V_2) between the label and inter-label gap portions of the media **13,** and translate it in such a way that it fits within the desired range of levels defined by Target_V1 and Target_V2. For example, in the particular embodiment of Figure 14, the desired range of levels represented by Target_V1 and Target_V2 correspond to a range of levels that fall between five and fifty percent of the operational range of the processor **96**'s A-to-D converter.

[0041] With knowledge of both actual (or sampled) input values (V_1 and V_2) for the media **13,** and corresponding target output values (Target_V1 and Target_V2) of the signal-conditioning module **92**, the required gain and virtual ground offset voltage of the amplifier can be calculated from, Gain = (Target_V2 - Target_V1) / (V_2 - V_1). Furthermore, due to the linear nature of the amplifier shown in Figure 13, it is also true that Gain = (Target_V2 - Voffset) / (V_2 - Voffset). Therefore, it follows that:

$$\text{Gain} * (V_2 - \text{Voffset}) = (\text{Target\_V2} - \text{Voffset});$$

$$(V_2 - \text{Voffset}) * \text{Gain} + \text{Voffset} = \text{Target\_V2};$$

$$\text{Voffset} - (\text{Gain} * \text{Voffset}) = \text{Target\_V2} - (\text{Gain} * V_2);$$

$$\text{Voffset} * (1 - \text{Gain}) = \text{Target\_V2} - (\text{Gain} * V_2);\ \text{and finally,}$$

$$\text{Voffset} = (\text{Target\_V2} - (\text{Gain} * V_2)) / (1 - \text{Gain}).$$

[0042] As indicated above, the gain term of the amplifier shown in Figure 13 is governed by, Gain = 1 + (R1/R2)*Dgain, where: Dgain is the microprocessor-controlled on-to-off duty cycle of the pulse-width-modulated signal for the switch, SW; R1 is the feedback resistance; and R2 is the total resistance from the negative opamp input terminal to virtual ground (Voffset). Therefore, Dgain = (Gain - 1)/(R1/R2).

[0043] Now that the desired virtual ground offset voltage, Voffset, has been calculated, the particular duty cycle of the PWM signal that will generate this virtual ground, Doffset, can also be found since the offset duty cycle to offset voltage relationship is linear. In particular, because this relationship is linear, it would be understood by one of ordinary skill in the art that: (Doffset - D_{e1}) / (D_{e2} - D_{e1}) = (Voffset - V_1) / (V_2 - V_1), where D_{e1} and D_{e2} are the duty cycles of the offset-voltage-generating PWM signals that produce offset voltages equal to V_1 and V_2, respectively. As will be described in further detail below, in regard to Figure 15, when the label and inter label gap voltages, V_1 and V_2, are found, so too are the corresponding virtual-ground offset-voltage duty cycles, D_{e1} and D_{e2}. As indicated above, the virtual-ground offset-voltage duty cycle, De, represents the On-to-Off duty cycle of the microprocessor control signal that is used to generate the virtual ground reference, Voffset.

[0044] As would be understood by one of ordinary skill in the art, the determination of D_{e1} and D_{e2} is made possible by the fact that Vout = Vin = Voffset independent of gain when the input voltage, Vin, is equal to the virtual ground, Voffset, for a difference amplifier as described in Figure 13. This becomes apparent if one recalls the equation in Figure 13, which is essentially Vout = Voffset + Gain*(Vin - Voffset), where Gain = 1 + (R1/B2)*Dgain. When the difference between Vin and Voffset is zero, it follows that Vout = Voffset independent of gain, because any gain times zero is still zero. Accordingly, one method of determining the virtual-ground offset-voltage duty cycle, De, corresponding to a particular input voltage, Vin, is to adjust the amplifier's virtual ground, Voffest, by adjusting, De, until no change in Vout is observed with changes in gain. Therefore, returning to the fact that (Doffset - D_{e1}) / (D_{e2} - D_{e1}) = (Voffset - V_1) / (V_2 - V_1), it follows that:

$$(\text{Doffset} - D_{e1}) = ((\text{Voffset} - V_1) / (V_2 - V_1)) * (D_{e2} - D_{e1});$$

and finally,

$$\text{Doffset} = (((\text{Voffset} - V_1) / (V_2 - V_1)) * (D_{e2} - D_{e1})) + D_{e1}.$$

[0045] Figure 15 shows a media sensor calibration logic diagram for determining the virtual ground offset voltage (Voffset) and corresponding on-to-off duty cycle (Doffset) that will generate this offset voltage, for a given media **13** in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. The process begins, at Step 1, where the system finds the first stable-amplifier-output media position ("Point A") by moving the media **13** along the feed path **32** until the first stable output is found. However, before the media **13** is moved from its current position (whatever position that may be), the system sets the gain to minimum (1 V/V) and increases the LED (or emitter) current, D_i, until the output voltage, Vout, of the signal-conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** equals V_{T2}. If the emitter current, Di, reaches a maximum value before the output voltage, Vout, reaches V_{T2}, the system increases the gain until Vout = V_{T2}. This procedure allows for optimal detection of small changes in media opacity by placing the signal, Vout, in the center of the operational region of the processor **96**'s A-to-D converter (i.e., because, in the embodiment of Figure 14, V_{T2} was set at a level that corresponds to the 50% point of the A-to-D converter's operational region).

[0046] With the emitter current, Di, and the gain set accordingly, the media **13** is then moved along the feed path **32** until the first stable output is found. If the signal (Vout) presented at the Analog-to-Digital converter of the micro-processor **96** moves beyond the operational range of the converter, i.e. the signal goes into saturation or cut-off, the gain and then the emitter (LED) current is lowered until the signal is returned to the operational range of the A-to-D converter. The first stable output is found by moving the media **13** until a stable signal (Vout) is obtained for a distance deemed significant enough to guarantee that the edge of a label is not between the emitter **76** and the detector of the sensor **78.** This Media position is declared Point A.

[0047] At Step **2,** the system finds the LED Current, D_i, such that the amplifier output (Vout) of the signal-conditioning module **92** is equal to the upper level target value (V_{T2}) with the gain set to minimum (1 V/V). By setting the gain to minimum (1 V/V), the amplifier output voltage (Vout) will be equal to the amplifier input voltage (Vin), with the actual value of such voltage being a function of the LED Current, D_i. Accordingly, with the gain set to minimum (1 V/V), the system increases D_i from a minimum value to a maximum value, stopping if Vout = V_{T2}. At the conclusion of this step (i.e., when Vout reaches V_{T2}, or when D_i reaches its maximum value (D_{iMAX}), whichever occurs first), the system records the current output voltage (Vout) as V_{OA}, where V_{OA} represents the amplifier **92** input voltage (sensor **78** output voltage) at Point A, with the LED Current, D_i, set to the value obtained in Step **2.** Because it cannot yet be determined whether Point A is on a label or an inter-label gap portion of the media **13,** it is not yet known whether V_{OA} corresponds to V_1 or V_2, as described in regard to Figure 14.

[0048] The process continues, at Step **3,** where the system finds the offset duty cycle, D_{eA}, that corresponds to the offset voltage equal to the amplifier **92** input voltage (V_{OA}) at Point A. To do so, the system first notes Vout with the gain set to minimum (1 V/V). This value can be referred to as the no-gain value of Vout at Point A. The system then proceeds to set the gain to maximum, which should cause Vout to increase or saturate. Next, as illustrated in Step **3** of Figure 15, the system increases the virtual-ground offset-voltage duty cycle, De, from a minimum to a maximum value, stopping if Vout drops below the previously noted no-gain value of Point A. At such time that Vout drops below the previously noted no-gain value of Point A, D_{eA} is set equal to the value of De that causes Voffset to equal Vin. The system then sets the gain to minimum (1 V/V) in preparation for finding the next stable-amplifier-output media position ("Point B").

[0049] The next stable-amplifier-output media position (Point B) is found in Step **4.** In one embodiment, the system initiates this step by moving the media **13** along the feed path **32** until the next stable output is found. The next stable output is found by moving the media **13** until a stable signal (Vout) is obtained for a distance deemed significant enough to guarantee that the edge of a label is not between the emitter **76** and the detector of the sensor **78.** This Media position is declared Point B. If this is the second time this step is being performed, the system can move the media **13** back along the feed path **32** instead of forward. Once the next stable output is found, the system records the current output voltage (Vout) as to V_{OB}, where V_{OB} represents the amplifier **92** input voltage (sensor **78** output voltage) at Point B, with the LED Current, D_i, set to the value obtained in Step **2.**

[0050] The process continues, at Step **5,** where the system finds the offset duty cycle, D_{eB}, that corresponds to the offset voltage equal to the amplifier **92** input voltage (V_{OB}) at Point B. To do so, the system first notes Vout with the gain set to minimum (1 V/V). This value can be referred to as the no-gain value of Vout at Point B. The system then proceeds to set the gain to maximum, which should cause Vout to increase or saturate. Next, as illustrated in Step **5** of Figure 15, the system increases the virtual-ground offset-voltage duty cycle, De, from a minimum to a maximum value, stopping if Vout drops below the previously noted no-gain value of Point B. At such time that Vout drops below the previously noted no-gain value of Point B, D_{eB} is set equal to the value of De that causes Voffset to equal Vin. The system then sets the gain to minimum (1 V/V) in preparation for finding the next stable-amplifier-output media position, if necessary.

[0051] The system then advances to Step **6** where it determines whether the LED current, D_i, needs to be reduced. In particular, the LED current needs to be reduced if the system determines that, at Point B, $D_i > D_{iMIN}$ and Vout > V_{T2}. If this is the case, then, without moving the media 13, the calibration process returns to Step **2,** where the system again finds the LED Current, D_i, such that the amplifier output (Vout) of the signal-conditioning module **92** is equal to the upper level target value (V_{T2}) with the gain set to minimum (1 V/V). In particular, with the gain set to minimum (1 V/V), the system again increases the emitter current, D_i, from a minimum value to a maximum value, stopping if Vout = V_{T2}. The system then proceeds with each of the remaining steps as described above.

[0052] On the other hand, if the system, at Step 6, determines that the LED current does not need to be reduced, either because D_i already equals D_{iMIN} or Vout <= V_{T2}, the system proceeds to Step **7** where it sorts the amplifier-output and offset-duty-cycle values for Points A and B. In other words, it is at this point that the system determines whether Point A corresponds to a label and Point B to an inter-label gap, or vice versa. Specifically, if $V_{OA} > V_{OB}$, then $V_2 = V_{OA}$, $D_{e2} = D_{eA}$, $V_1 = V_{OB}$, and $D_{e1} = D_{eB}$. Or, alternatively, if $V_{OB} > V_{OA}$, then $V_2 = V_{OB}$, $D_{e2} = D_{eB}$, $V_1 = V_{OA}$, and $D_{e1} = D_{eA}$. With Points A and B properly sorted, the system proceeds to Step **8** where it computes the final virtual ground offset voltage (Voffset) and corresponding duty cycle (Doffset) in accordance with the following equations that were discussed above in regard to Figure 14: Gain = $(V_{T2} - V_{T1}) / (V_2 - V_1)$; Dgain = (Gain - 1) / (R1 / R2); Voffset = (Gain * $V_2 - V_{T2}$) / (Gain - 1); and Doffset = (((Voffset - V_1) / ($V_2 - V_1$)) * ($D_{e2} - D_{e1}$)) + D_{e1}, where the duty cycles are limited to values between 0% and 100%.

[0053] Another aspect of the present invention includes using averaging techniques to determine average values for the opacity measurements taken of the media **13.** These average values can, in turn, be used to achieve an even better estimate or representation of the corresponding signal levels obtained above. In addition to opacity changes in the media **13** due, for example, to the presence of labels and inter-label gaps, there is also an error signal in the media's opacity caused by the fact that most media types are not perfectly homogenous. Error signals may also be introduced by certain time-varying performance characteristics of sensor components. Such inconsistencies in the media **13** and/or performance characteristics of related sensor components create a noise signal that essentially rides along the opacity profile of the media as it moves past the sensing point of the sensor **78.**

[0054] As a result, opacity measurements (e.g., V_1, V_2) made at a first point along the media **13,** such as at the beginning of a calibration, may not always be representative of other points encountered along the media. In particular, if only one set of opacity measurements is used to determine the appropriate signal levels, as described above, and these measurements happen to be atypical of other points along the media **13,** then the resulting gain and offset values may also be atypical of such other points. Thus, by averaging a series of opacity measurements taken at different times and at different points along the media **13,** the system can achieve a better estimate or representation of what the average label opacity is, and likewise, what the average gap opacity is for the media.

[0055] Figure 16 illustrates a first set of possible scenarios associated with determining the virtual ground offset voltage (Voffset) and corresponding duty cycle (Doffset) for a given media **13,** where position A is on a label and Position B is on a gap. In the first scenario of Figure 16, the label opacity is high enough to prevent the sensor signal from reaching V_{T2}, at position A, with the LED Current at Max. At position B, the gap opacity is lower than the label opacity, but still high enough to prevent the sensor signal from reaching V_{T2} with the LED Current at Max. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) 92 would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding first dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 16.

[0056] In the second scenario of Figure 16, the label opacity is high enough to prevent the sensor signal from reaching V_{T2}, at position A, with the LED Current at Max, and the gap opacity is low enough to allow the sensor signal to exceed V_{T2}, at position B. Therefore, as indicated above, the system restarts the calibration on the gap (new point A'), and then moves back to the label (new point B'). This will result in a lower LED Current, which, in turn, will result in the sensor signal being lower on the label. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding second dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 16.

[0057] In the third scenario of Figure 16, the label opacity allows the sensor signal to reach V_{T2}, at position A, with the LED Current between Min and Max, and the gap opacity is low enough for the sensor signal to exceed V_{T2}, at position B, with the LED Current at the setting from Position A. Thus, the system again restarts calibration on the Gap (new point A'), and then moves back to the label (new point B'). This will result in a lower LED Current, and may result in Min current with the sensor signal at point point A' exceeding V_{T2}. Therefore, the sensor signal will be lower on the label. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding third dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 16.

[0058] In the fourth scenario of Figure 16, the label opacity is low enough that the sensor signal exceeds V_{T2}, at position A, even with LED Current is at Min. Furthermore, the gap opacity is lower than the label opacity, causing the sensor signal, at position B, to exceed the sensor signal at position A and V_{T2} with the LED Current at the setting from Position A. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding fourth dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 16.

[0059] Figure 17 illustrates a second set of possible scenarios associated with determining the virtual ground offset voltage (Voffset) and corresponding duty cycle (Doffset) for a given media **13,** where Position A is on a gap and Position B is on a label. In the first scenario of Figure 17, the gap opacity is high enough to prevent the sensor signal from reaching V_{T2}, at position A, with the LED Current at Max, and the label opacity is higher than the gap opacity, resulting in lower signal at position B. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding first dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 17.

[0060] In the second scenario of Figure 17, the gap opacity is low enough to allow the sensor signal to reach V_{T2}, at position A, with the LED Current between Min & Max. Furthermore, the label opacity is higher than the gap opacity, resulting in a lower signal at position B. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding second dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 17.

[0061] In the third scenario of Figure 17, the gap opacity is low enough that the sensor signal exceeds V_{T2}, at position A, even with the LED Current at Min. As also shown in this scenario, the label opacity is higher than the gap opacity, resulting in a lower signal at position B. Accordingly, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding third dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 17.

[0062] In the fourth scenario of Figure 17, the gap opacity is again low enough that the sensor signal exceeds V_{T2}, at position A, even with LED Current at Min. Furthermore, the label opacity is higher than the gap opacity, but not high enough to result in a signal below V_{T2}, at position B. Accordingly, in this scenario, the signal conditioning module (or amplifier) **92** would amplify and shift the output signal of the sensor **78** in a manner indicated by the corresponding fourth dashed line shown in the bottom portion of Figure 17.

[0063] As with the self-calibrating media edge sensor arrangement described above, the present media edge detection arrangement can also be configured to operate in a black mark detecting mode (or reflective mode). For example, in one embodiment, the invention can be selectable between dual modes. In a first mode, the sensor **78** and related signal processing system **82** operate as described above, monitoring web transmissivity changes resulting from spaces between labels. In a second mode, the sensor **78** and related signal processing system **82** monitor web reflectivity changes resulting from the passage of black mark(s) **20** placed on the back side of the media **13.** To add the second mode, a second emitter **79** can be located proximate the sensor **78** to illuminate the sensor side of the web **13.** With the circuit in black mark detecting mode, the first emitter 76 is disabled and the second emitter **79** is energized.

[0064] As similarly illustrated previously in Figures 8-9, the signal level progression of the sensor **78** operates with an inverted steady state as the sensor receives the second emitter **79**'s output reflection from the web, causing an elevated output between black marks **20.** When a black mark approaches, the resulting lowered reflection from the web is detected by the sensor **78** causing a drop in the sensor output level. In one embodiment, the opacity profile of the media **13** in the black mark (or reflective) detecting mode can be inverted so that the resulting opacity profile appears much as it would in the transmissive mode. Using the techniques described above, by again controlling one or more of the power to the emitter current, and the gain and virtual ground offset voltage of the signal conditioning module **92**, the system will produce sensor output signals that can be discriminated by the signal processing system **82** on the main logic board **80.**

[0065] Another aspect of the present invention includes using a collimated light source, such as a VCSEL or side emitting laser for sensing media edge detection events. The embodiments above were described primarily in the context of using an LED for the emitter **76.** However, one problem with LEDs is that they do not have columnized light beams, but instead send out light that is dispersed and not focused. Because LEDs are not focused, the opening on a corresponding detector window has to be fairly wide, and as a result, the detector tends to receive a lot of ambient light and other noise. The advent of improved (e.g., lower power, less expensive) laser technology, which provides a more focused light beam, allows for improved edge detection performance with less noise and other issues related to LEDs. In some cases, this has been shown to increase edge detection accuracy by a factor of four or better.

[0066] Figure 18 shows a high level block diagram of a media edge detection arrangement **108** using, for example, a VCSEL **120** in accordance with an embodiment of the present invention. The arrangement 108 includes a signal processing system **110** having a signal conditioning module **112,** an edge sensing module **114** and a processor **116.** The processor **116** can be used to perform a number of functions including controlling the operation of the VCSEL **120** via the VCSEL control circuit **118.** It should be noted, however, that the power applied to the VCSEL **120** is typically not varied as was disclosed above with regard to varying the power to the LED emitter **76.** In one embodiment, the laser **120** that is used is a model SFH9210 VCSEL with reflective transmitter manufactured by Osram. As shown, the VCSEL **120** is configured to transmit a beam of infrared light through the media **13** towards the sensor **122.**

[0067] The output signal of the sensor **122** can be fed through a filtering module **124,** which may include a notch filter used for hooking signals within a certain frequency range while filtering out ambient light and other noise that might be detected. An amplifier **126** may also be included for amplifying the signal after it has been filtered. The signal is then provided to the signal processing system **110,** where the signal conditioning module **112** is used to normalize the signal to a certain range of levels for detection. In one embodiment, the signal conditioning module **112** adjusts the signal to about sixty percent of its input level before presenting the normalized signal to the edge sensing module **114.** The edge sensing module **114** can then be used to determine various transition events associated with the media **13,** as described above. For example, using the techniques above, the edge sensing module **114** can be used to determine a label signal level and an inter-label gap signal level for the media **13,** which, in turn, can be used to set an appropriate threshold for detecting the edge of a label.

[0068] As with the other embodiments described above, it should be noted that the VCSEL **120** and corresponding sensor **122** can be configured to operate on either side of the media **13** for a given application. Similarly, the VCSEL **120** can also be configured to operate in a reflective mode, where a receiver/sensor (not shown) is located adjacent or integral to the VCSEL for receiving return signals reflected off of one side (e.g., the back) of the media **13.** In yet another embodiment, a plurality of sensors **122** could be positioned along one side of the media **13** and the VCSEL **120** could be configured to move back and forth along the media path to find notches, black strips and other identifying marks on a label.

[0069] Although the various embodiments described above have been discussed with regard to sensing where the edge of a label is for aligning the printer or the printhead with the label so as to have proper registration and data on the label when printed, it is understood that these techniques have various other uses within the printer. This includes any situation where there is a need to detect that a label is present. For example, some printers include a peel bar assembly such as illustrated in Figure 19, which allows a label to be peeled after it has been printed and presented to a user in a peeled state. The assembly **128** includes a peel bar **130** in communication with the liner or backing of the media and a peel roller **132** in communication with the platen **38.** In the peel mode, the media with the label is fed over the peel bar and the liner is fed between the platen **38** and peel roller. When the media is advanced by the platen, the liner or backing is separated from the label **134,** and the label is presented to the user.

[0070] In this particular instance, it is typically not advisable for the the printer to print a next label until the user has removed the previous label. Otherwise, the leading label may drop to the floor or adhere to the printer. This may also be a problem for non-label media. For example, a printer may be used to print on continuous media such as to print receipts that can either be cut, partially cut, or torn off after printing. It may be desirable to not print a next receipt until the leading receipt is removed. Further, some printers use linerless media that has an adhesive on the back surface, which call stick to the printer or fall and stick to the floor if not removed prior to a next print.

[0071] Figure 19 illustrates an embodiment of the present invention that can eliminate such concerns. Specifically, the embodiment includes a sensor 136 that is either part of or adjacent to the peel assembly. The sensor is directed in front of the peel bar **130** for sensing whether a label is present. In one embodiment, the sensor may include an LED or a collimated light source, such as a side emitting laser, a VCSEL or similar laser system, that directs light to a position in front of the peel bar. The sensor may further include a light receiver. When a label is present, light from the light source is reflected from the label to the sensor. Once the label is removed, the sensor no longer senses the reflected light. This sensor indication can be monitored by the print controller to thereby determine when the label is removed. This could be similarly used in non-label media applications such as receipt printers and a printer that uses linerless media.

[0072] Figure 19 illustrates a particular example in which the sensor comprises two sensors, **138** and **140,** respectively. One of the sensors **138** is directed toward a position in front of the peel bar **130** to sense the presence of a label. The other sensor **140** is directed at the liner or backing material as it feeds from the peel bar **130** to the peel roller **132.** In this configuration, the sensors may monitor both the presence of label in front of the peel bar and the liner or backing material. The sensor **138** indicates when a label is present.

[0073] The sensor **140** can have several purposes. For example, it can be used to determine if there has been a problem with peeling of a label. If a label does not peel properly from the liner, it will continue to feed with the liner toward the peel roller. When the label travels past the sensor **140,** the sensor will note a change in opacity and signal to the print controller that there is a jam or malfunction.

[0074] In addition or alternatively, the sensor **140** could also be used automatically to sense a peel mode configuration of the printer. Specifically, most printers are configured to either peel or not peel the liner or backing from the label. Some printers require that the user actively feed the liner or backing over the peel bar and through the peel roller, while other printers provide flip down peel bar mechanism that are activated by the user to place the printer in peel mode. Unfortunately, with most of these conventional systems, the user must manually input to the printer to operate in a peel mode configuration. In the present invention, however, the sensor **140** can be used to sense when liner or backing material is present between the peel bar and peel rollers and automatically relay to the printer controller that the printer is in peel mode.

[0075] In yet another additional or alternative embodiment, either one or both or possibly several sensors, **138** and **140,** can be used by the printer to ensure that the user has properly installed the media. For example, the sensor or sensors **140** could be placed along the intended feed path of the liner or backing when in the peel mode. If the user has indicated that he/she is using the printer in the peel mode, these sensors can provide information to the printer controller to ensure that the media has been properly fed over the peel bar and the peel rollers.

[0076] The sensors **138** and **140** may also be used to relay information concerning the labels and or liner or backing material. Specifically, the labels may include information on the back of the label that is machine readable, such as marks, bar codes, etc., that can be detected for read by sensor **138** and relayed to the printer controller when the label is peeled. Similarly, the liner could include information on a top surface that is visible when the label is peeled away. This information can be detected or read by the sensor **140** and relayed to the printer controller.

[0077] As illustrated in Figure 10, a sensor, **76** and **78,** may be located in the printer housing at a location between the roll of media and the printhead. This sensor or series of sensor may also be used to determine the type of media located in the printer. For example, the sensor may sense transitions beteen label and liner and relay to the print controller that the media is linered label stock. The printer might use this information to place the printer in peel mode.

[0078] As mentioned above, the embodiments may use a collimating light source such as a side emitting laser or VCSEL. As illustrated in Figure 19, the light source and sensors for detecting the presence of a label may be located either outside or near an opening of the printer. In this location, external light may affect sensor performance. The use of a collimated light source allows for use of sensors having narrower light acceptance windows, which in turn reduces the affects of ambient light on the sensors.

[0079] Where in the foregoing description reference has been made to ratios, integers or components having known equivalents then such equivalents are herein incorporated as if individually set forth.

[0080] While the present invention has been illustrated by the description of the embodiments thereof, and while the embodiments have been described in considerable detail, it is not the intention of the applicant to restrict or in any way limit the scope of the appended claims to such detail. Additional advantages and modifications will readily appear to those skilled in the art. Therefore, the invention in its broader aspects is not limited to the specific details, representative apparatus, methods, and illustrative examples shown and described. Accordingly, departures may be made from such details without departure from the spirit or scope of applicant's general inventive concept. Further, it is to be appreciated that improvements and/or modifications may be made thereto without departing from the scope or spirit of the present invention as defined by the following claims.

Claims

1. A system for detecting the presence of a media extending from an opening of a printer comprising:

a printhead (54) for printing on the media; and
a platen (38) located adjacent to said printhead for advancing said media past said printhead and toward an opening in the printer;
the system **characterized by**:

a sensor (136) located proximate to said platen for detecting when media is present, wherein the media comprises labels (134) located on a liner (142);
a peel assembly adjacent said platen comprising a peel bar (130) for separating the labels from the liner after the label is printed, wherein as the liner wraps around an edge of the peel bar, the label is separated, and wherein said sensor comprises:

a first sensor (138) located adjacent to said peel bar to sense the presence of the label after it is removed from the liner; and
a second sensor (140) located adjacent to said peel bar to sense the presence of the liner after the label has been removed.

2. A system according to Claim 1, wherein said sensor (136) is located proximate said opening.

3. A system according to Claim 1 further comprising a cutting means located proximate said platen (38) to cut the media following printing, wherein said sensor (136) is located on a side of said cutting means opposite said platen for sensing when the media has been removed from the printer.

4. A system according to Claim further comprising a print controller, wherein said sensor (136) determines a characteristic of the media and provides the characteristic to the said print controller.

5. A system according to Claim 1 further comprising a light source for emitting energy directed at the media, wherein the emitted energy is at least one of passed through or reflected by the media.

6. A system according to Claim 5, wherein said light source emits a collimating light.

7. A method for detecting the presence of a media extending from an opening of a printer comprising:

advancing the media between a platen (38) and a printhead (54) and toward an opening in the printer; wherein the method is **characterized by**:

sensing at a location proximate to the platen for detecting when media is present, wherein the media comprises labels (134) located on a liner (142);
providing a peel assembly adjacent said platen comprising a peel bar (130); and
separating the labels from the liner after the label is printed, wherein as the liner wraps around an edge of the peel bar, the label is separated, and
wherein said sensing step comprises:

sensing the presence of the label after it is removed from the liner; and
sensing the presence of the liner after the label has been removed.

8. A method according to Claim 7, wherein said sensing step senses at a location proximate the opening.

9. A method according to Claim 7 further comprising cutting the media following printing, and wherein said sensing step senses when the media has been removed from the printer.

10. A method according to Claim 7 wherein said sensing step determines a characteristic of the media.

11. A method according to Claim 7 further comprising emitting energy directed at the media, wherein the emitted energy is at least one of passed through or reflected by the media.

12. A method according to Claim 11, wherein said emitting step emits a collimating light.

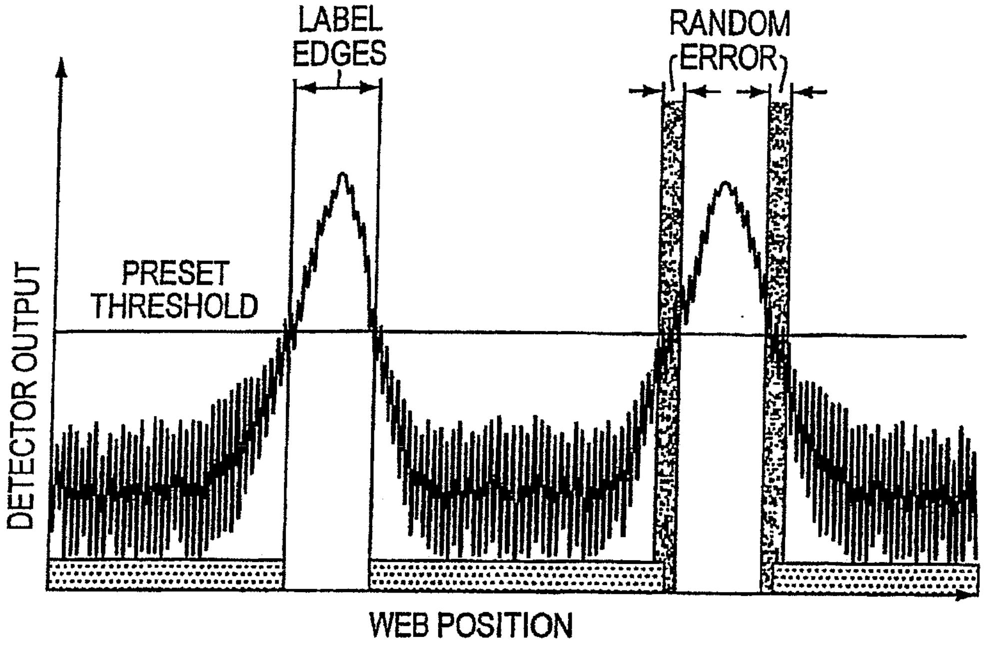

LABEL EDGES
RANDOM ERROR
PRESET THRESHOLD
DETECTOR OUTPUT
WEB POSITION

FIG. 1

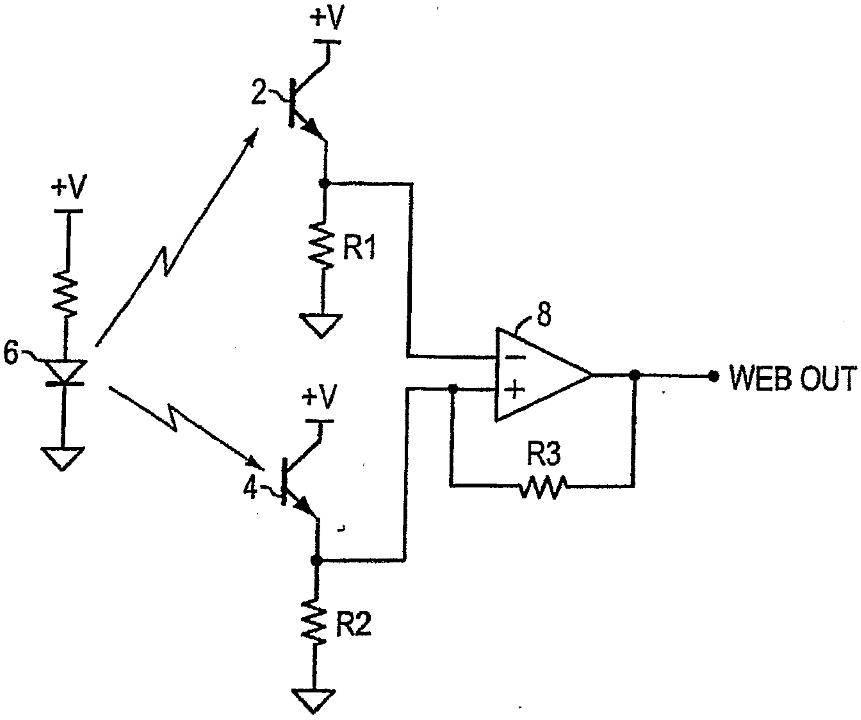


FIG. 2

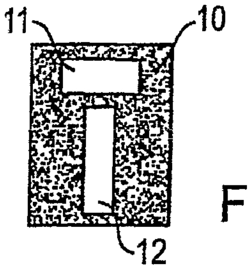


FIG. 3

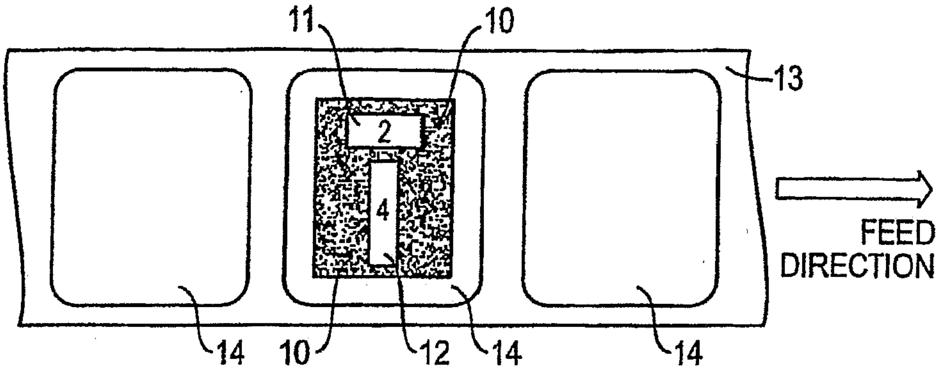


FIG. 4A

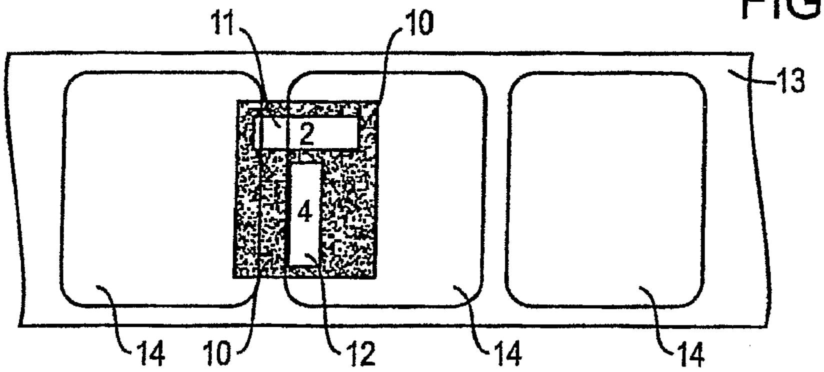


FIG. 4B

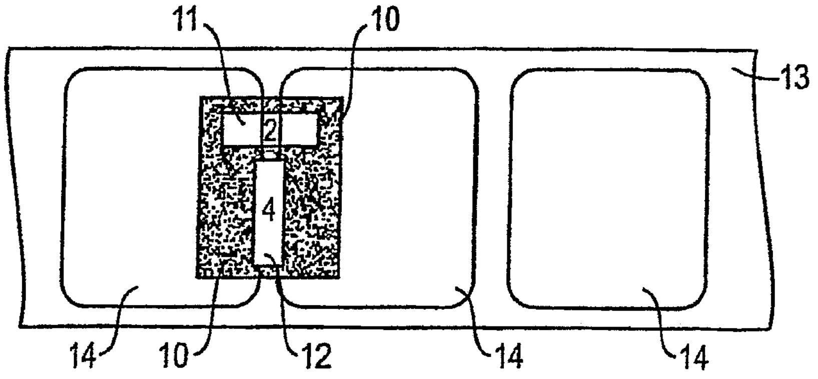


FIG. 4C

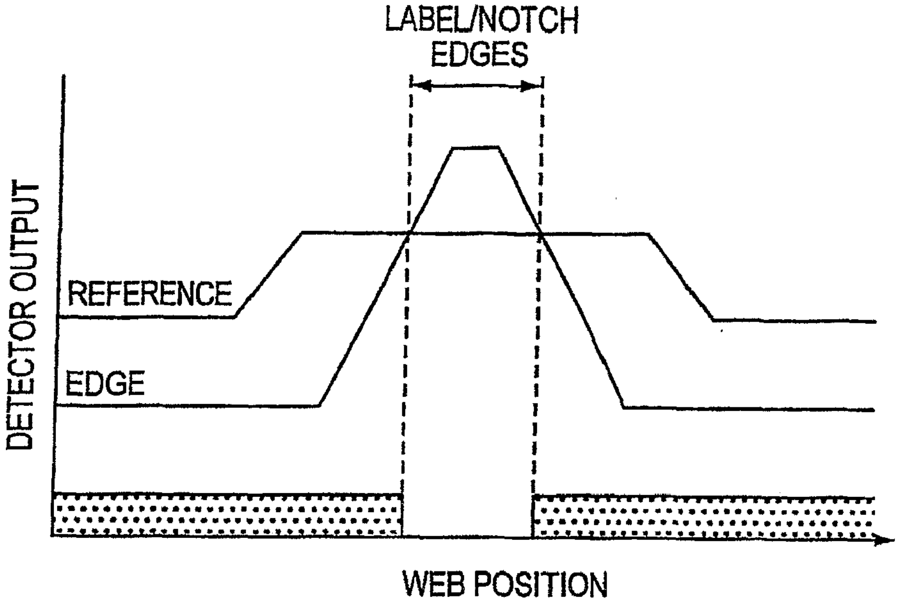

LABEL/NOTCH EDGES
DETECTOR OUTPUT
REFERENCE
EDGE
WEB POSITION

FIG. 5

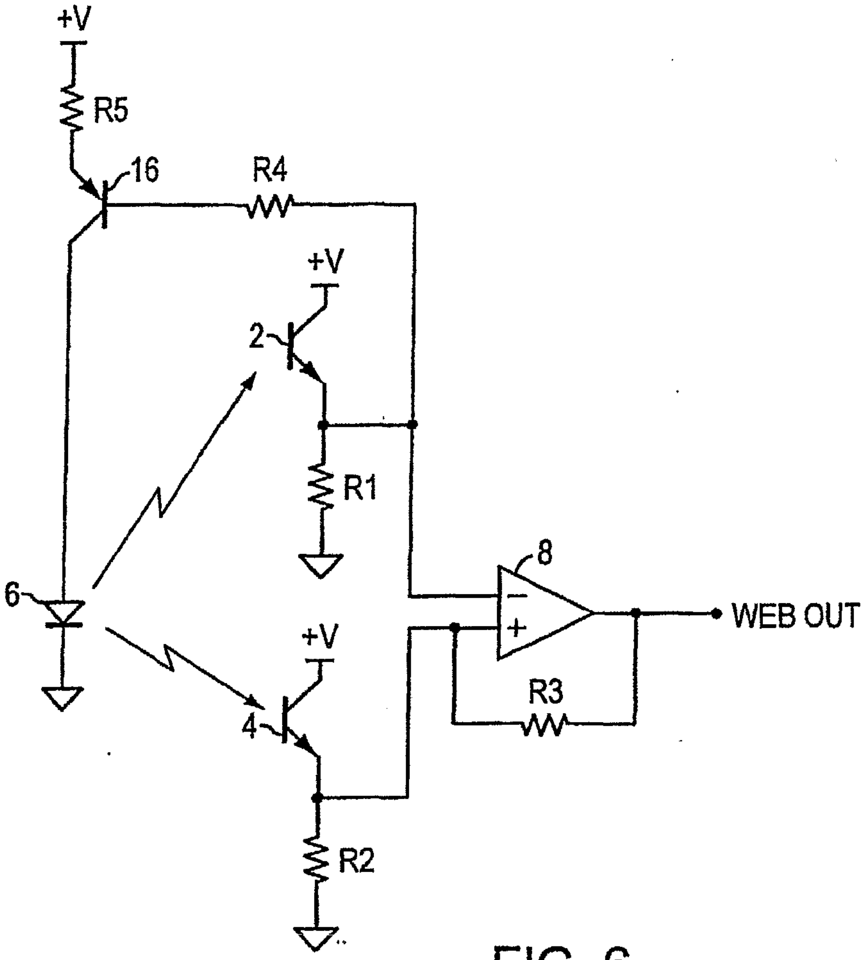


FIG. 6

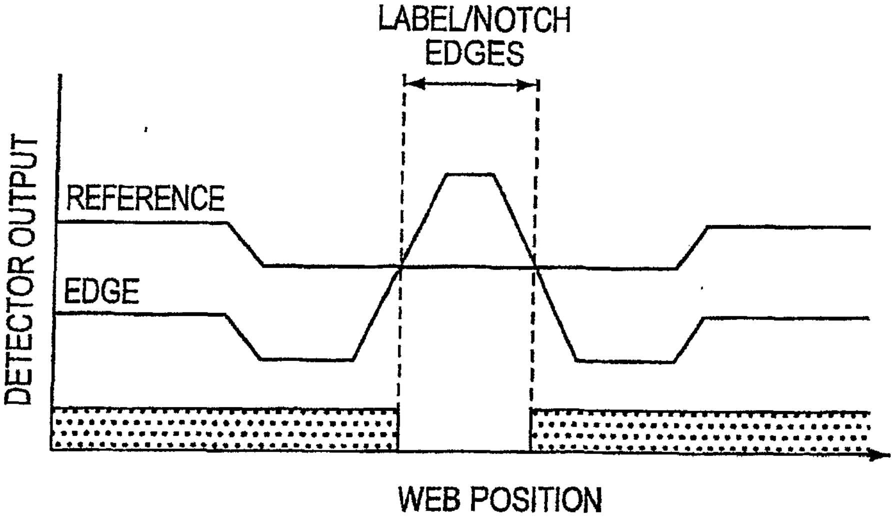

LABEL/NOTCH
EDGES
DETECTOR OUTPUT
REFERENCE
EDGE
WEB POSITION

FIG. 7

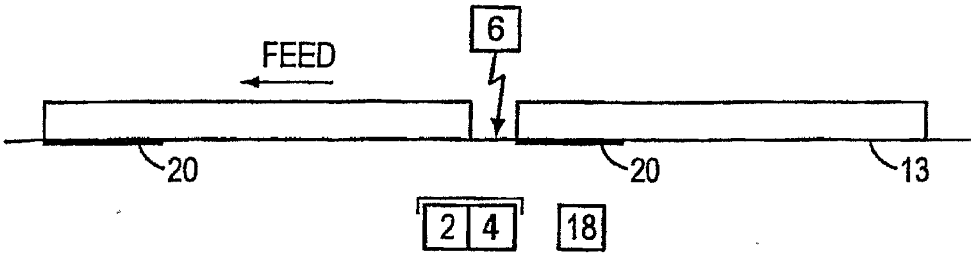


FIG. 8A

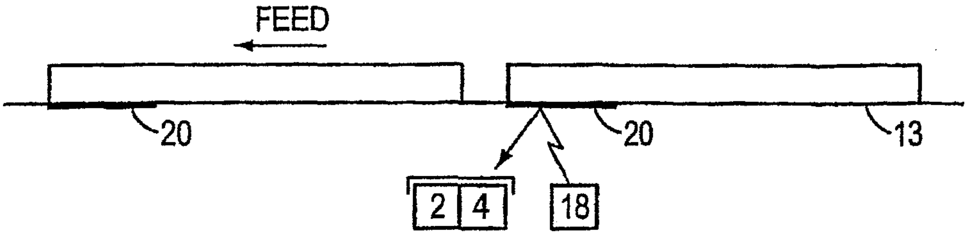


FIG. 8B

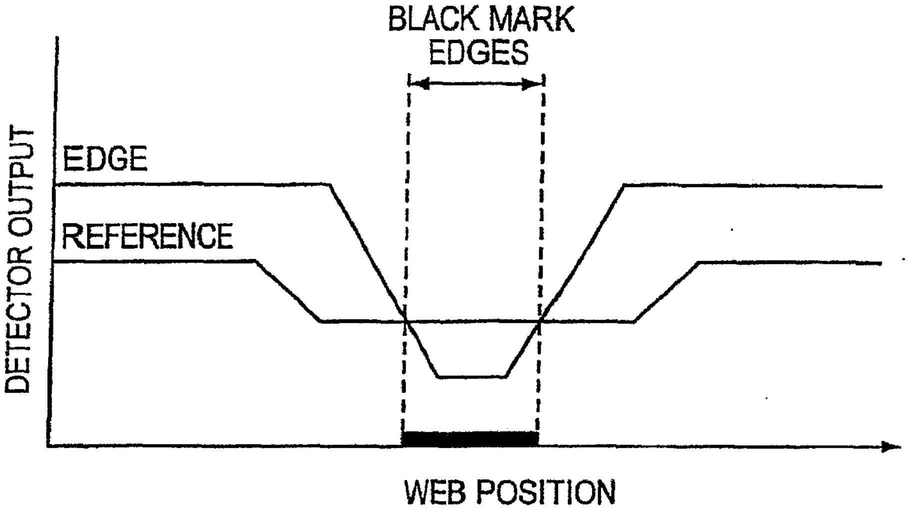

BLACK MARK
EDGES
EDGE
REFERENCE
DETECTOR OUTPUT
WEB POSITION

FIG. 9

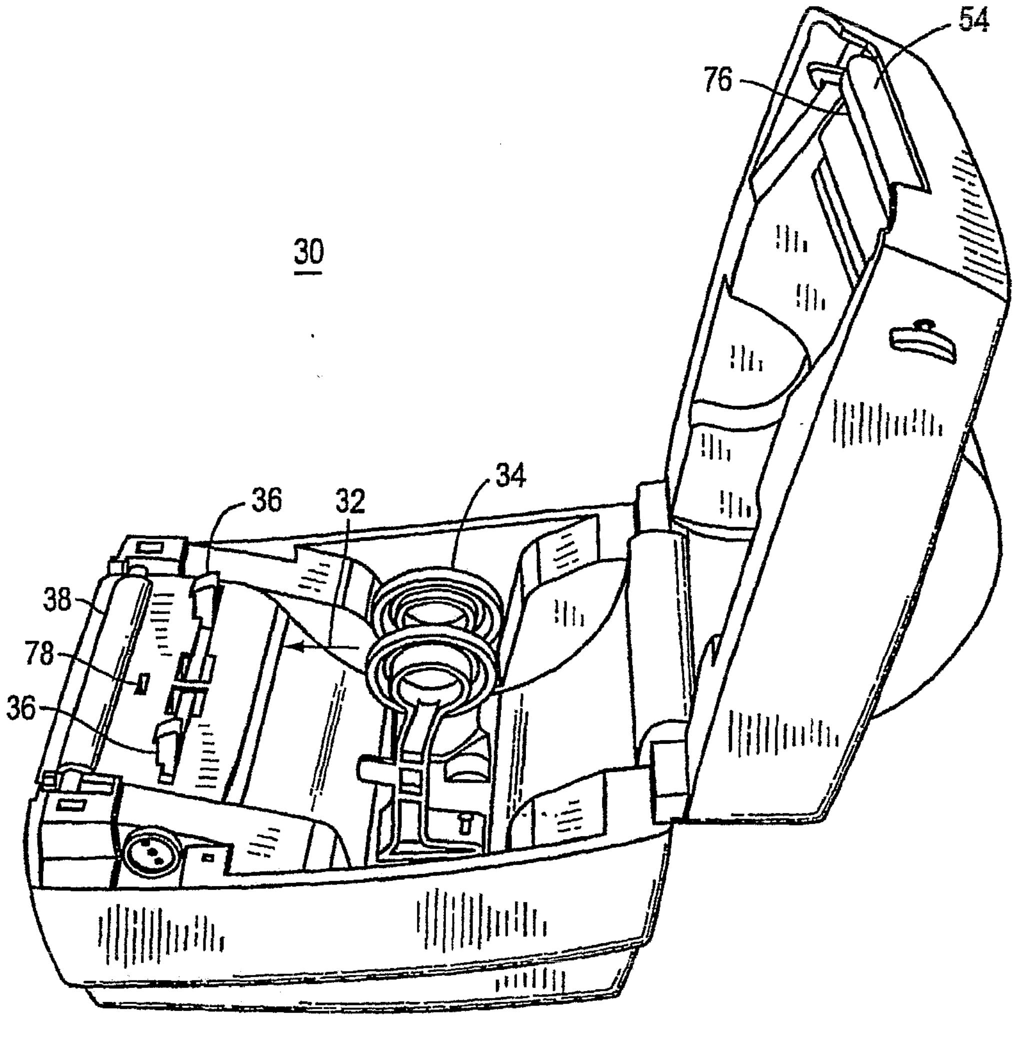


FIG. 10

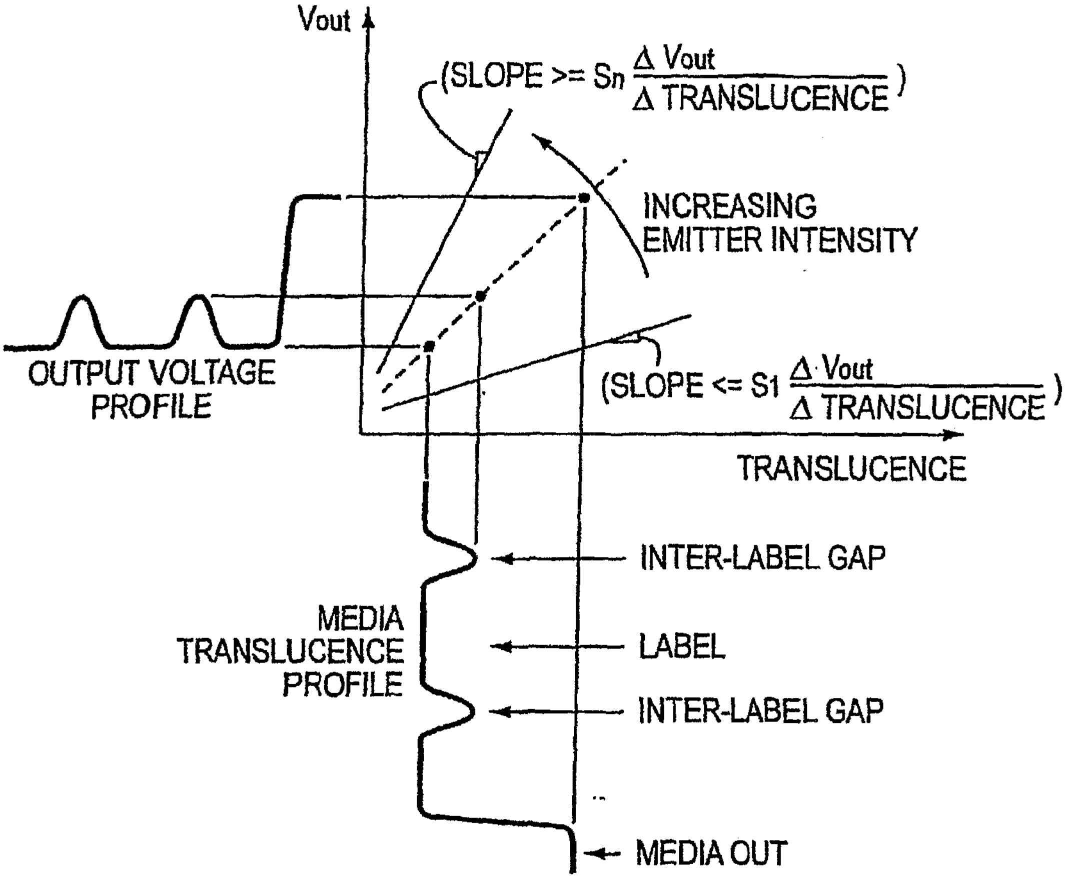

Vout
(SLOPE >= Sn $\frac{\Delta \text{Vout}}{\Delta \text{TRANSLUCENCE}}$)
INCREASING EMITTER INTENSITY
OUTPUT VOLTAGE PROFILE
(SLOPE <= S1 $\frac{\Delta \text{Vout}}{\Delta \text{TRANSLUCENCE}}$)
TRANSLUCENCE
INTER-LABEL GAP
MEDIA TRANSLUCENCE PROFILE
LABEL
INTER-LABEL GAP
MEDIA OUT

FIG. 11

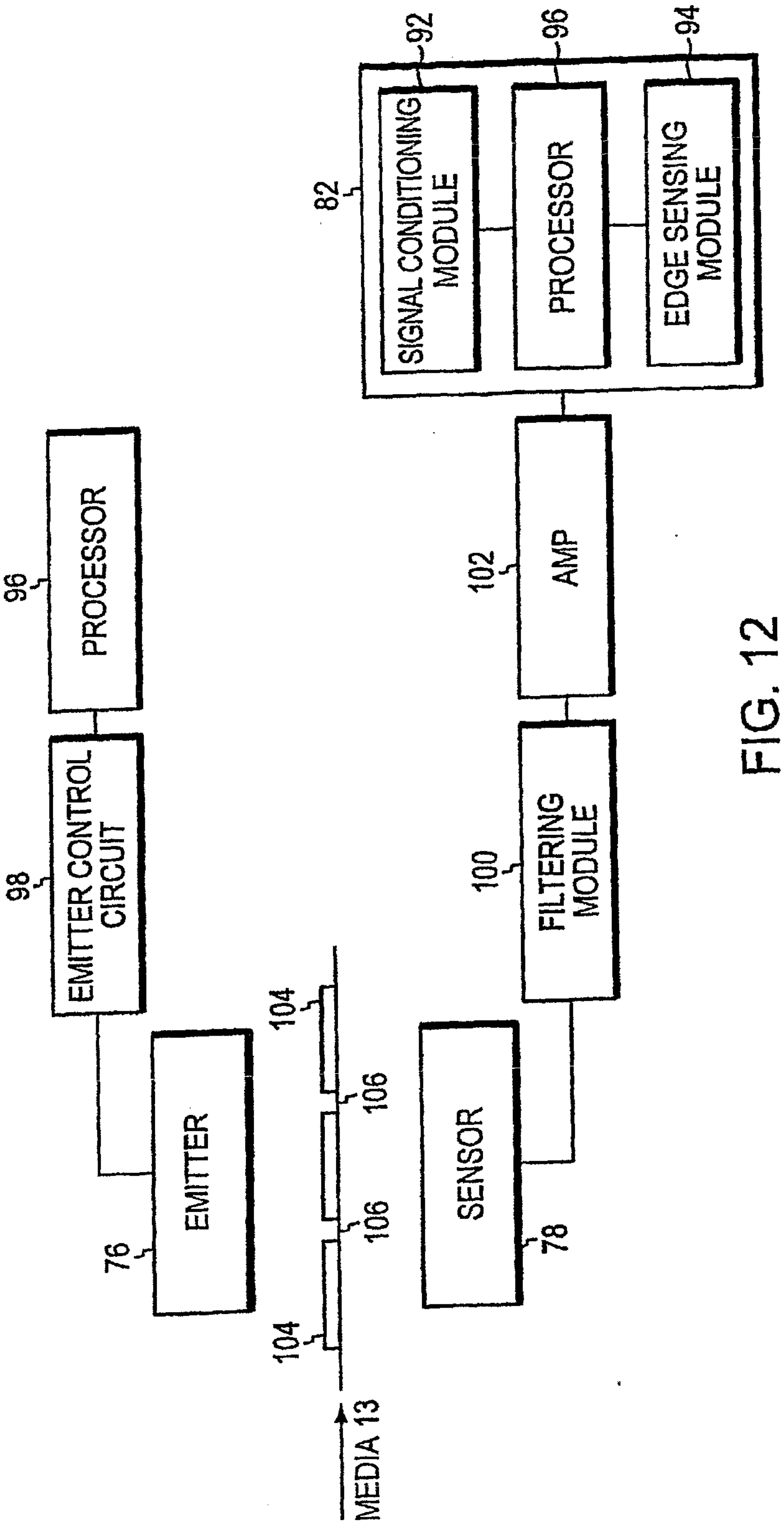
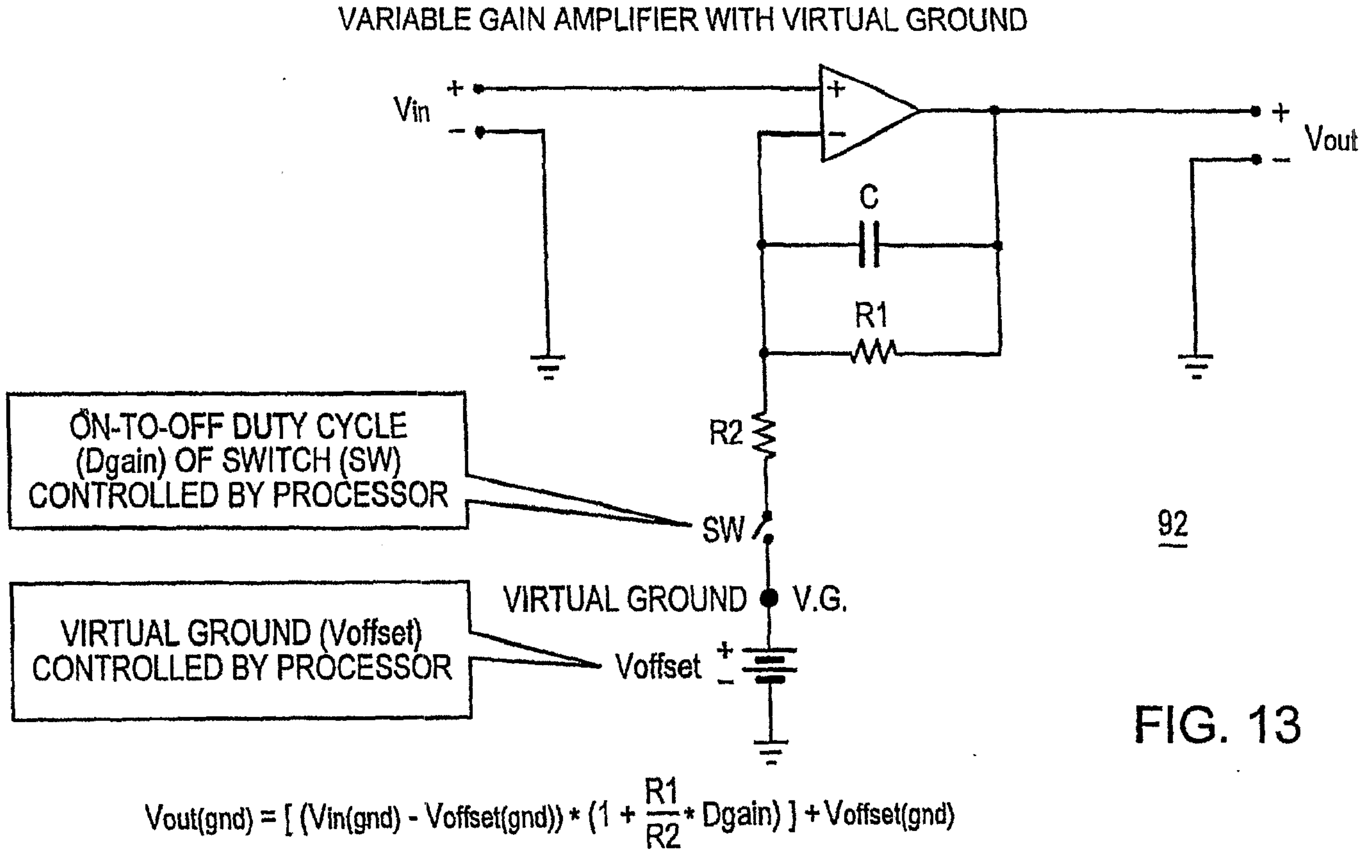

PROCESSOR
96
EMITTER CONTROL CIRCUIT
98
EMITTER
76
MEDIA 13
104
106
106
104
SENSOR
78
FILTERING MODULE
100
AMP
102
82
SIGNAL CONDITIONING MODULE
92
PROCESSOR
96
EDGE SENSING MODULE
94

FIG. 12



$$Vout(gnd) = [\ (Vin(gnd) - Voffset(gnd)) * (1 + \frac{R1}{R2} * Dgain)\ ] + Voffset(gnd)$$

FIG. 13

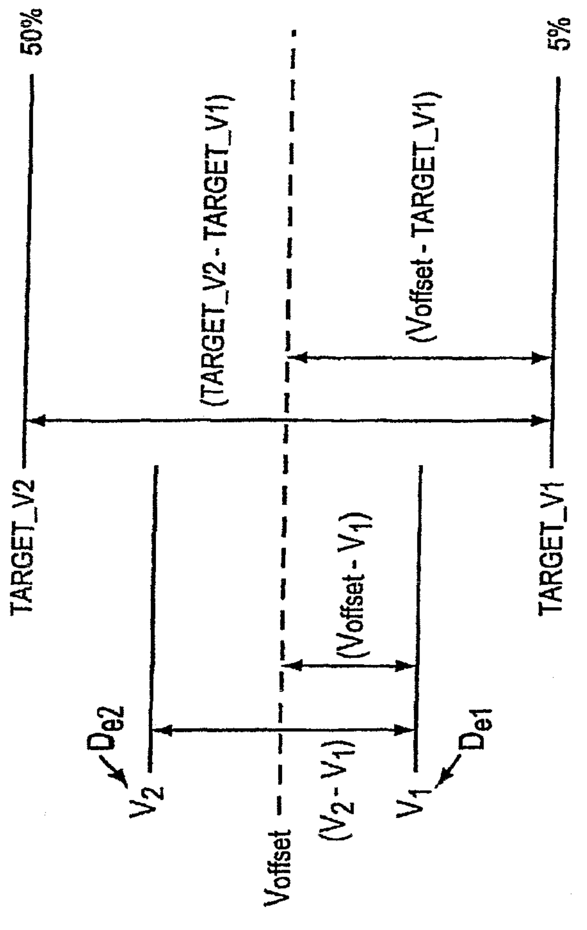
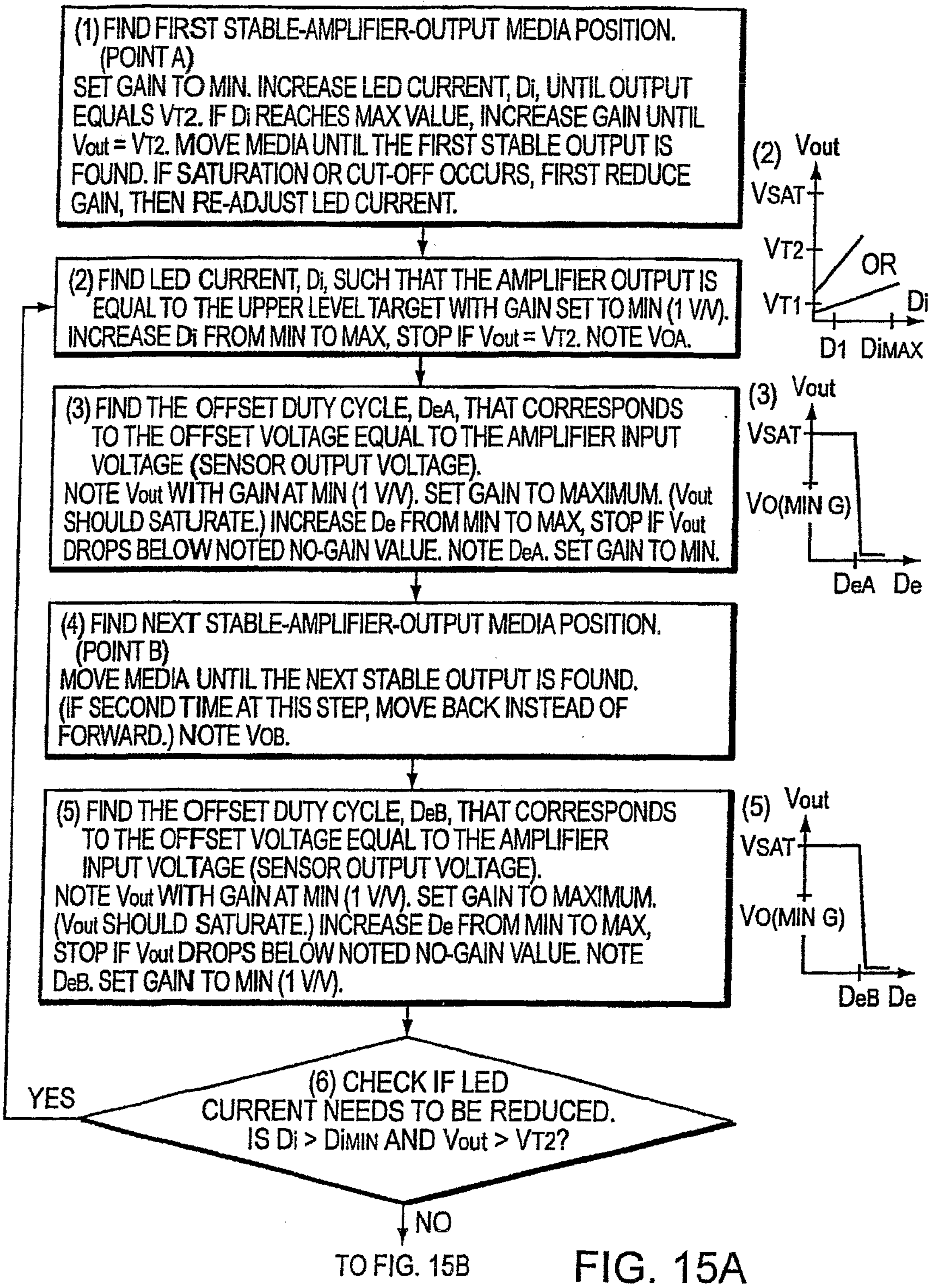


FIG. 14

$$\frac{(V_{offset} - V_1)}{(V_2 - V_1)} = \frac{(D_{offset} - D_{e1})}{(D_{e2} - D_{e1})}$$

MEDIA SENSOR CALIBRATION LOGIC DIAGRAM



(1) FIND FIRST STABLE-AMPLIFIER-OUTPUT MEDIA POSITION. (POINT A)
SET GAIN TO MIN. INCREASE LED CURRENT, Di, UNTIL OUTPUT EQUALS VT2. IF Di REACHES MAX VALUE, INCREASE GAIN UNTIL Vout = VT2. MOVE MEDIA UNTIL THE FIRST STABLE OUTPUT IS FOUND. IF SATURATION OR CUT-OFF OCCURS, FIRST REDUCE GAIN, THEN RE-ADJUST LED CURRENT.

(2) FIND LED CURRENT, Di, SUCH THAT THE AMPLIFIER OUTPUT IS EQUAL TO THE UPPER LEVEL TARGET WITH GAIN SET TO MIN (1 V/V). INCREASE Di FROM MIN TO MAX, STOP IF Vout = VT2. NOTE VOA.

(3) FIND THE OFFSET DUTY CYCLE, DeA, THAT CORRESPONDS TO THE OFFSET VOLTAGE EQUAL TO THE AMPLIFIER INPUT VOLTAGE (SENSOR OUTPUT VOLTAGE).
NOTE Vout WITH GAIN AT MIN (1 V/V). SET GAIN TO MAXIMUM. (Vout SHOULD SATURATE.) INCREASE De FROM MIN TO MAX, STOP IF Vout DROPS BELOW NOTED NO-GAIN VALUE. NOTE DeA. SET GAIN TO MIN.

(4) FIND NEXT STABLE-AMPLIFIER-OUTPUT MEDIA POSITION. (POINT B)
MOVE MEDIA UNTIL THE NEXT STABLE OUTPUT IS FOUND. (IF SECOND TIME AT THIS STEP, MOVE BACK INSTEAD OF FORWARD.) NOTE VOB.

(5) FIND THE OFFSET DUTY CYCLE, DeB, THAT CORRESPONDS TO THE OFFSET VOLTAGE EQUAL TO THE AMPLIFIER INPUT VOLTAGE (SENSOR OUTPUT VOLTAGE).
NOTE Vout WITH GAIN AT MIN (1 V/V). SET GAIN TO MAXIMUM. (Vout SHOULD SATURATE.) INCREASE De FROM MIN TO MAX, STOP IF Vout DROPS BELOW NOTED NO-GAIN VALUE. NOTE DeB. SET GAIN TO MIN (1 V/V).

(6) CHECK IF LED CURRENT NEEDS TO BE REDUCED. IS Di > DiMIN AND Vout > VT2?

FIG. 15A

MEDIA SENSOR CALIBRATION LOGIC DIAGRAM (CONTINUE)

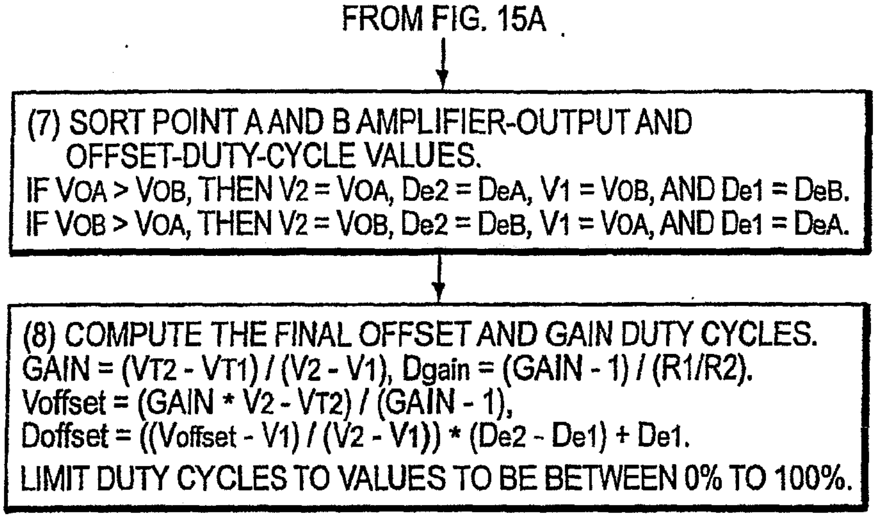
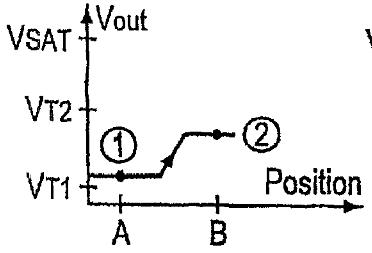
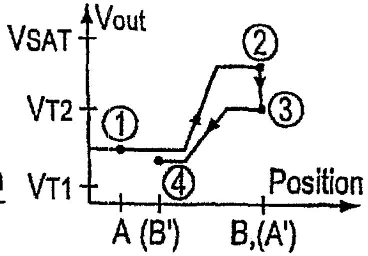


FIG. 15B

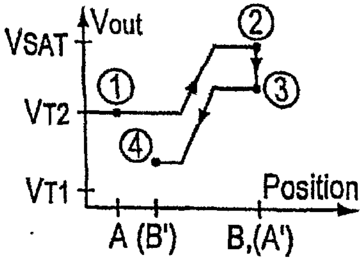
POSSIBLE SCENARIOS I. POSITION A: ON LABEL, POSITION B: ON GAP



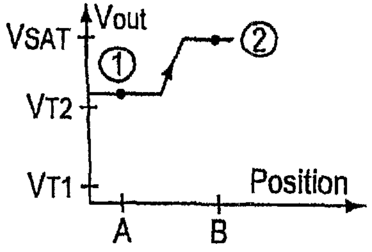
1) Label opacity is high enough to prevent sensor signal from reaching VT2, at position A, with LED current at max.
2) Gap opacity lower than label opacity, but still high enough to prevent sensor signal from reaching VT2, at position B, with LED current at max.



1) Label opacity is high enough to prevent sensor signal from reaching VT2, at position A, with LED current at max.
2) Gap opacity is low enough to allow sensor signal to exceed VT2, at position B.
3) Restart calibration on gap (new point A') then move back to label (new point B'). This will result in lower LED current.
4) Therefore, the sensor signal will be lower on the label.



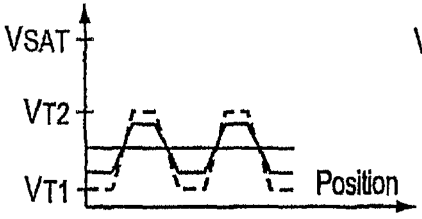
1) Label opacity allows, sensor signal to reach VT2, at position A, with LED current between min and max.
2) Gap opacity low enough for sensor signal to exceed VT2, at position B, with LED current at setting from position A.
3) Restart calibration on gap (new point A'), then move back to label (new point B'). This will result in lower LED current, and may result is min current with the sensor signal at point A' exceeding VT2.
4) Therefore, the sensor signal will be lower on the label.

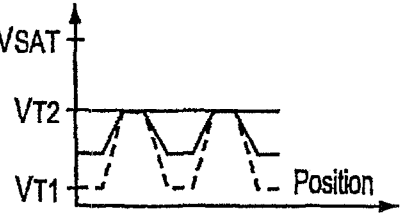


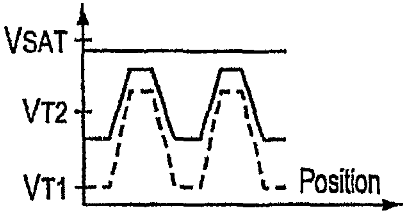
1) Label opacity is low enough that the sensor signal exceeds VT2, at position A, even with LED current at min.
2) Gap opacity lower than label opacity, causing sensor signal, at position B, to exceed sensor signal at position A and VT2 with LED current at setting from position A.

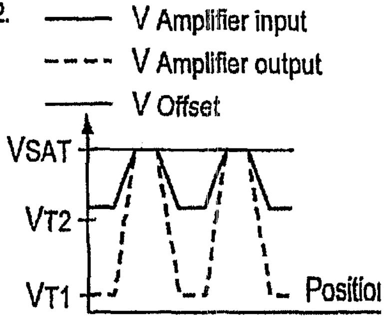
FIG. 16

AFTER CALIBRATION



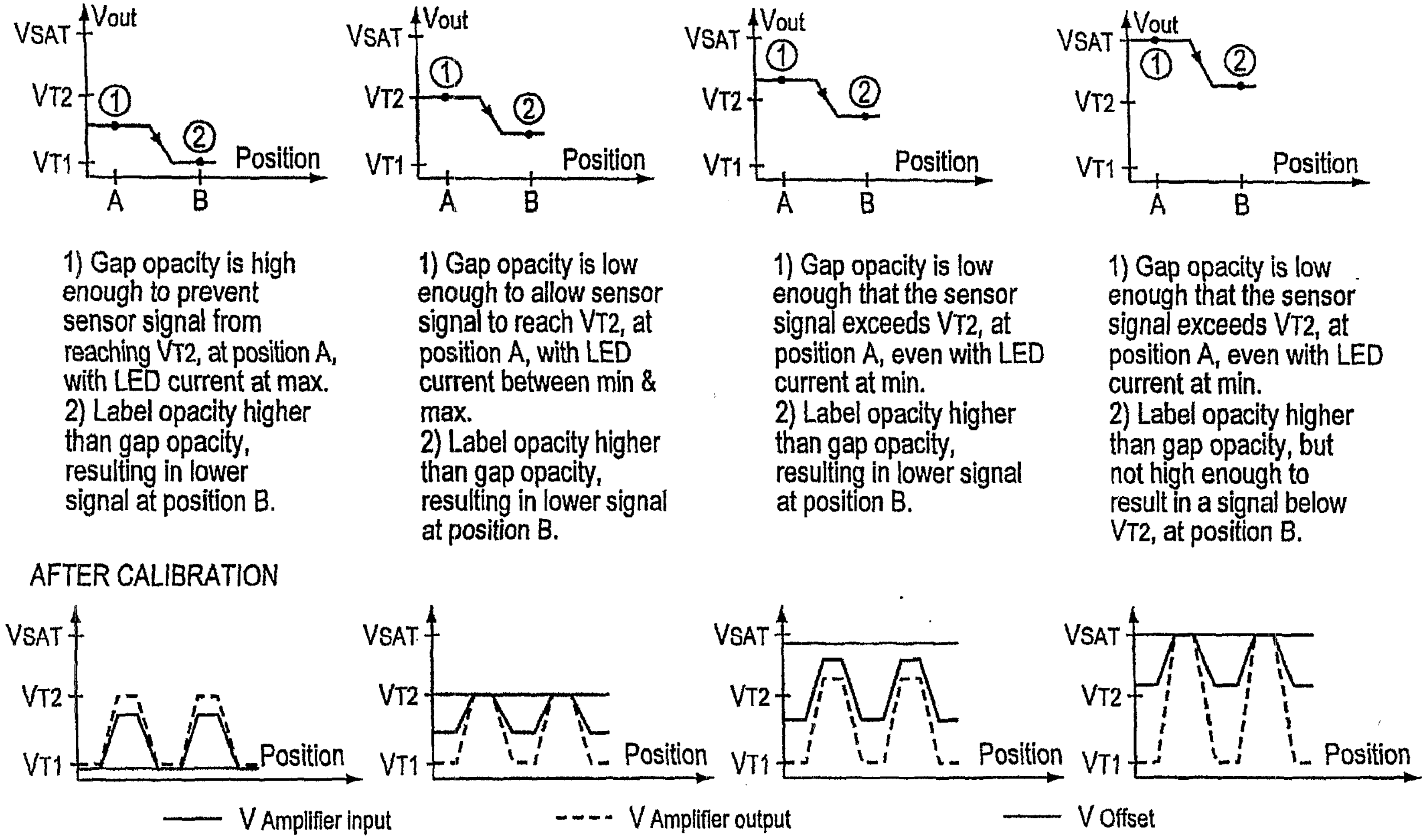






POSSIBLE SCENARIOS II.
POSITION A: ON GAP, POSITION B: ON LABEL

FIG. 17



1) Gap opacity is high enough to prevent sensor signal from reaching V_{T2}, at position A, with LED current at max.
2) Label opacity higher than gap opacity, resulting in lower signal at position B.

1) Gap opacity is low enough to allow sensor signal to reach V_{T2}, at position A, with LED current between min & max.
2) Label opacity higher than gap opacity, resulting in lower signal at position B.

1) Gap opacity is low enough that the sensor signal exceeds V_{T2}, at position A, even with LED current at min.
2) Label opacity higher than gap opacity, resulting in lower signal at position B.

1) Gap opacity is low enough that the sensor signal exceeds V_{T2}, at position A, even with LED current at min.
2) Label opacity higher than gap opacity, but not high enough to result in a signal below V_{T2}, at position B.

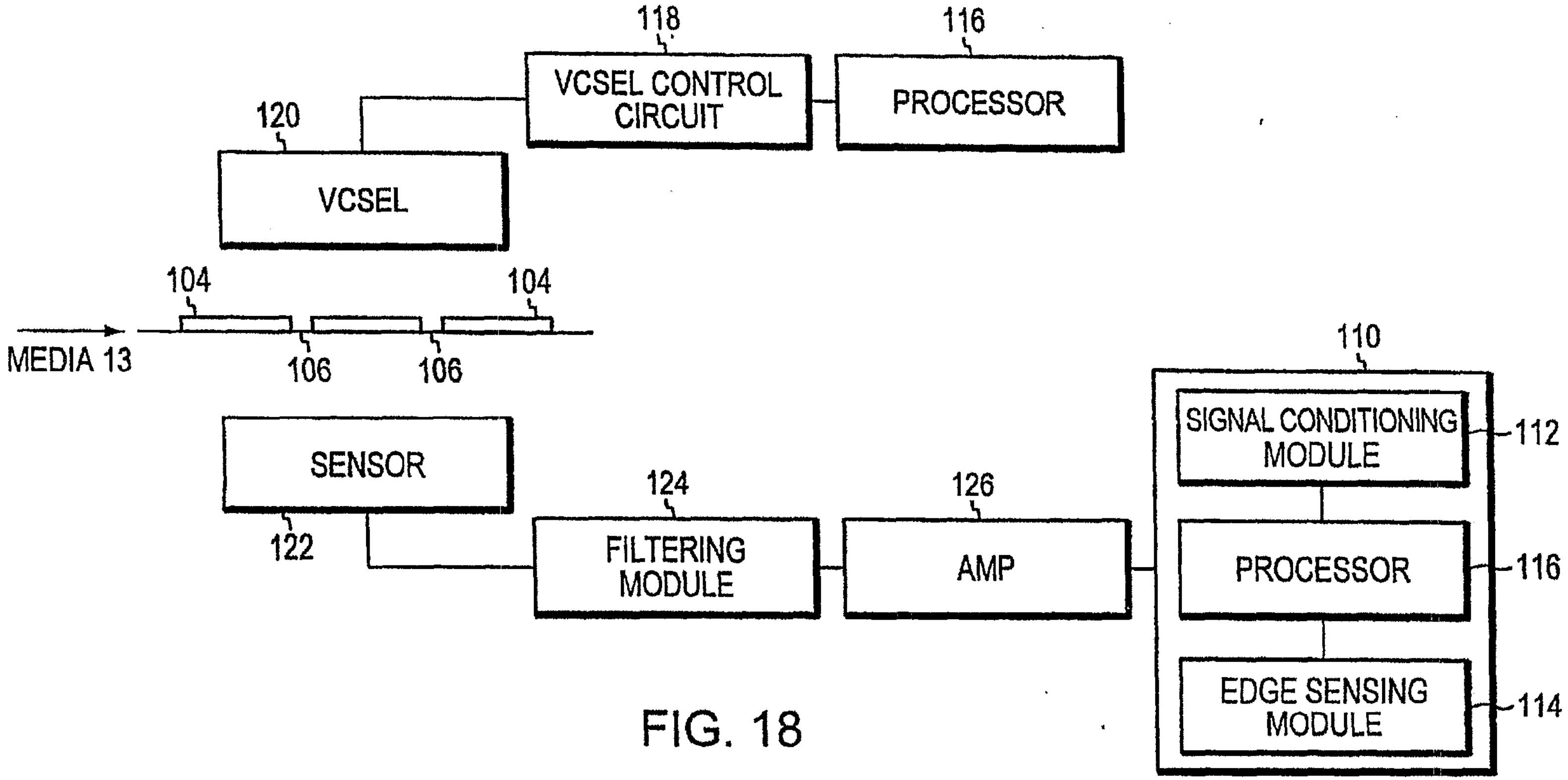

118
116
VCSEL CONTROL CIRCUIT
PROCESSOR
120
VCSEL
104
104
MEDIA 13
106
106
110
SIGNAL CONDITIONING MODULE
112
SENSOR
124
126
PROCESSOR
116
122
FILTERING MODULE
AMP
EDGE SENSING MODULE
114

FIG. 18

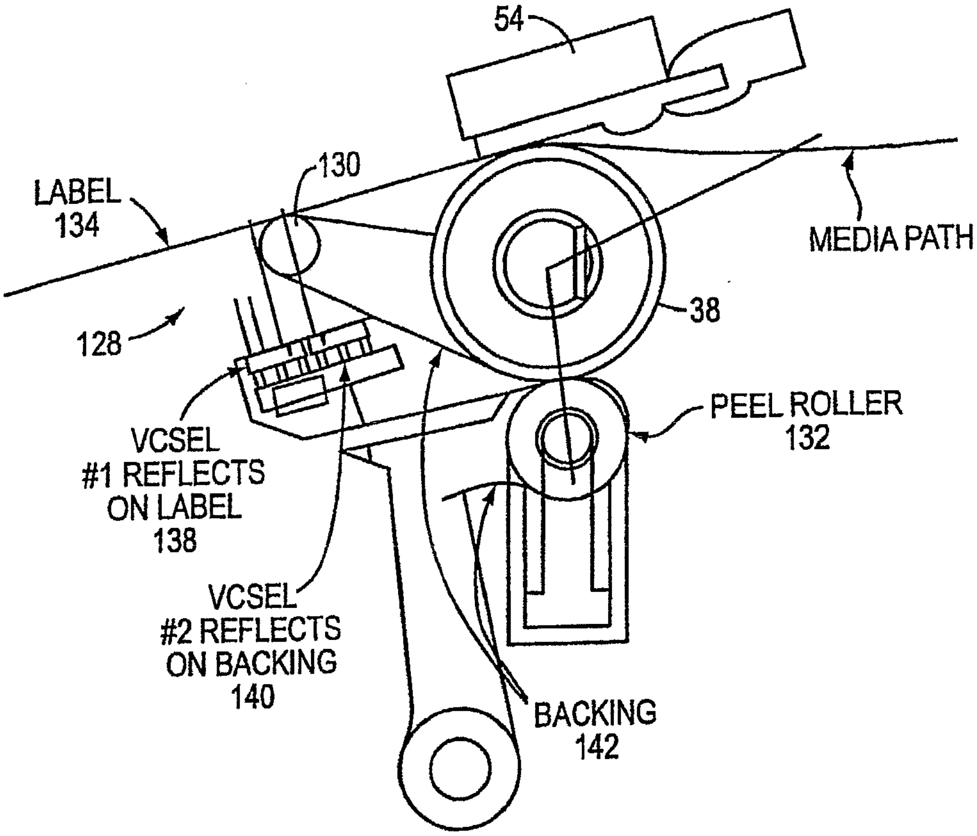

54
130
LABEL 134
MEDIA PATH
128
38
PEEL ROLLER 132
VCSEL #1 REFLECTS ON LABEL 138
VCSEL #2 REFLECTS ON BACKING 140
BACKING 142

FIG. 19

European Patent Office

EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT

Application Number
EP 07 11 6778

DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document with indication, where appropriate, of relevant passages	Relevant to claim	CLASSIFICATION OF THE APPLICATION (IPC)
A	US 5 438 349 A (FOX DUANE M [US] ET AL) 1 August 1995 (1995-08-01) * column 2, line 62 - column 6, line 6; figures 2-7 * -----	1,7	INV. B65H37/00 B65C9/18 B65C9/42
A	EP 0 015 553 A (VYDEC INC [US]) 17 September 1980 (1980-09-17) * page 5, line 4 - page 7, line 2; figures 1,2 * -----	1,7	
A	EP 0 694 410 A (TOKYO ELECTRIC CO LTD [JP]) 31 January 1996 (1996-01-31) * page 2, line 36 - page 3, line 54; figures 1-4 * -----	1,7	
A	US 5 803 635 A (AUSTIN PIXIE ANN [US] ET AL) 8 September 1998 (1998-09-08) * column 2, line 16 - column 2, line 51; figures 1-12 * -----	1,7	

TECHNICAL FIELDS SEARCHED (IPC)
B65H
B65C
B41J

The present search report has been drawn up for all claims

Place of search	Date of completion of the search	Examiner
Munich	6 November 2007	Fachin, Fabiano

CATEGORY OF CITED DOCUMENTS

X : particularly relevant if taken alone
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A : technological background
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D : document cited in the application
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ANNEX TO THE EUROPEAN SEARCH REPORT ON EUROPEAN PATENT APPLICATION NO. EP 07 11 6778

This annex lists the patent family members relating to the patent documents cited in the above-mentioned European search report.
The members are as contained in the European Patent Office EDP file on
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06-11-2007

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		JP 6183114 A	05-07-1994
		SE 9301765 A	23-11-1993
EP 0015553 A	17-09-1980	AU 5620080 A	30-10-1980
EP 0694410 A	31-01-1996	DE 69506491 D1	21-01-1999
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		ES 2126184 T3	16-03-1999
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		US 5564846 A	15-10-1996
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For more details about this annex : see Official Journal of the European Patent Office, No. 12/82