

Measurement of the Dielectric Constant and Loss Tangent of High Dielectric-Constant Materials at Terahertz Frequencies

Peter Haring Bolivar, Martin Brucherseifer, Jaime Gómez Rivas, Ramón Gonzalo, *Member, IEEE*, Iñigo Ederra, Andrew L. Reynolds, M. Holker, and Peter de Maagt, *Senior Member, IEEE*

Abstract—Low-loss high dielectric-constant materials are analyzed in the terahertz frequency range using time-domain spectroscopy. The dielectric constant and loss tangent for steatite, alumina, titania loaded polystyrene, and zirconium–tin–titanate are presented and compared to measurements on high-resistivity silicon. For these materials, the real part of the dielectric constant ranges from 6 to 90. All of the samples were found to have reasonable low-loss tangents. Applications as photonic crystal substrates for terahertz frequency antenna are envisaged.

Index Terms—Antennas, dielectric materials, measurements, submillimeter waves.

I. INTRODUCTION

LOW-LOSS high dielectric-constant materials have many applications in established and cutting-edge terahertz frequency systems. Interest is not limited to laboratory systems, but includes aerospace, automotive, communications, defence, domestic, medical, and marine applications. Furthermore, low-loss dielectric materials are now of increasing importance in the design of circuit components and quasi-optical elements. There is much work in this area, and rapid advances are being made in the development of terahertz sources, detectors, mixers, and similar components. However, the development of functional systems in this frequency range is dependent on the availability of improved components, including attenuators, isolators, modulators, switches, and directional couplers.

Recently, periodic electromagnetic or photonic bandgap (PBG) crystals have provided new impetus to the research into dielectric materials. The topic of PBG crystals is currently one of the most rapidly advancing sectors in electromagnetics, and

it has been receiving a great deal of attention in the last ten years. The interest is based on the ability of PBG crystals to control the propagation of electromagnetic waves to an extent that was not previously possible [1]. Following the theoretical demonstration of their feasibility, it took a number of years before a PBG crystal was physically realized.

Many of the technological problems associated with PBG crystals are practical, and usually relate to the method of manufacture. To this end, some ingenious ways of producing such crystals have recently been developed [2], [3]. One key element in the successful operation of these crystals is the dielectric contrast between the constituent materials, and there is a requirement for high-dielectric low-loss dielectric materials in the terahertz-frequency range.

Interest in dielectrics has usually been focused on the real part of the dielectric constant, and on the loss tangent. The problem that is often encountered at the early design phase of integrated or quasi-optical components is the serious shortage of data at terahertz frequencies, as most material characterization is routinely performed only in the megahertz frequency range. Furthermore, there can be significant variations in the measured results, arising from the measurement technique, supplier, or composition of the material (annealing, sintering, impurities, etc.). If data is available, it is very often only at spot frequencies, while for technical reasons, continuous coverage is attractive. In the microwave region, the dielectric characteristics are most often dominated by slowly varying dielectric relaxation. This means that many materials need only be characterized at a few frequencies, but at terahertz frequencies, this does not necessarily hold.

II. MEASUREMENT METHOD AND SETUP

For broad-band continuous analysis of high dielectric materials, a time-domain terahertz spectroscopy method was chosen [4]–[6]. In contrast to narrow-band conventional heterodyne methods, this technique enables extremely broad-band characterization from 50 GHz up to 43 THz [7]–[9]. Additionally, in contrast to incoherent measurement techniques (e.g., bolometric detection), which detect only the intensity of terahertz radiation, the time-domain approach is intrinsically coherent and, therefore, permits the detection of the amplitude and phase of a terahertz signal. This automatically suppresses the influence of any incoherent noise background, greatly enhancing the detection sensitivity. It also allows the measurement of complex material properties, like the complex dielectric constant,

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P. H. Bolivar and J. G. Rivas are with the Institut für Halbleitertechnik, Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule, Aachen, D-52056 Aachen, Germany.

M. Brucherseifer was with the Institut für Halbleitertechnik, Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule, Aachen, D-52056 Aachen, Germany. He is now with the Department of Physics and Engineering Physics, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, NJ 07030 USA.

R. Gonzalo and I. Ederra are with the Electrical and Electronic Engineering Department, Universidad Pública de Navarra, E-31006, Pamplona, Navarra, Spain.

A. L. Reynolds is with Harlow Laboratories, Nortel Networks, Essex CM17 9NA, U.K.

M. Holker is with Hiltek Microwave Ltd., Kent ME10 3RN, U.K.

P. de Maagt is with the Electromagnetics Division, European Space Research and Technology Centre, 2201 AG Noordwijk, The Netherlands.

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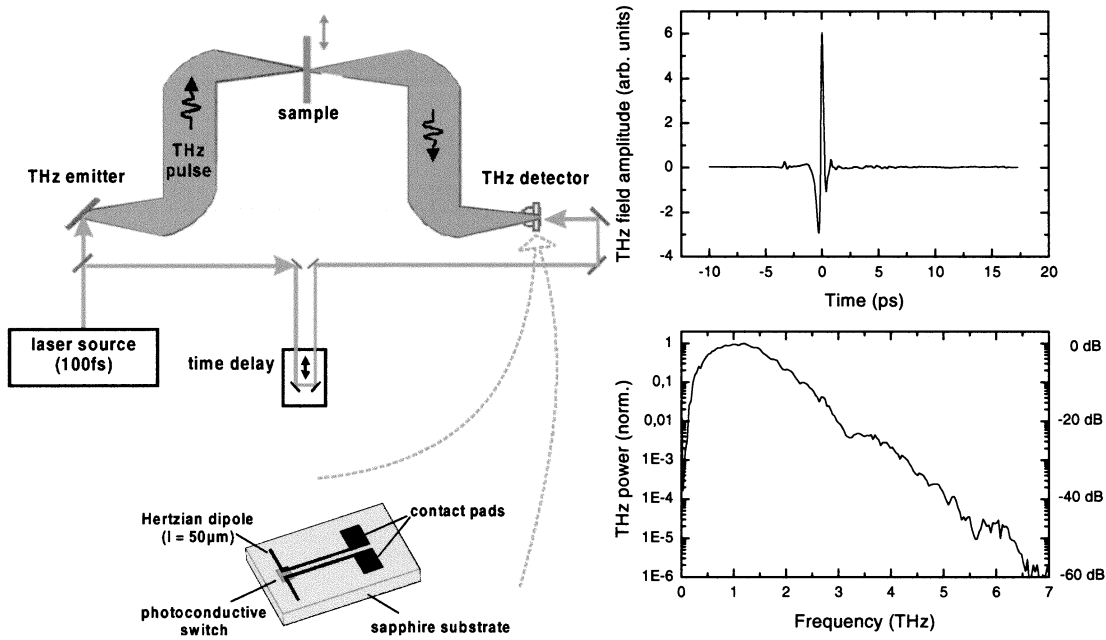


Fig. 1. (left) Schematic diagram of an experimental system for time-resolved terahertz spectroscopy. (right) Typical terahertz electric field transient and corresponding Fourier spectrum of the employed surface field emitter/photoconductive detector combination.

without requiring the potentially problematic Kramers–Kronig analysis.

The general concept of time-domain terahertz spectroscopy is to make use of ultrashort laser pulses to generate and detect terahertz radiation. Fig. 1 is a schematic diagram of an experimental test system for time-domain coherent terahertz spectroscopy. An ultrashort laser pulse, with duration of typically 10–100 fs, excites a terahertz emitter. The radiated pulse is focused on the sample by a pair of paraboloidal mirrors in order to avoid any dispersion introduced by using lenses. The transmitted terahertz electric field is then guided with a second pair of paraboloids and focused onto a detector. This monitors the electric field at the time it is gated by a second time-delayed laser pulse. The correlation of excitation and detection pulses allows the terahertz electric-field amplitude to be monitored in the time domain.

The time-domain terahertz spectroscopy system used is based on 100-fs optical pulses from a commercial Ti:Al₂O₃ laser operating at a repetition rate of 76 MHz to generate broad-band terahertz pulses by photoexciting charge carriers within the surface field of an epitaxial InGaAs film (for details see [10]). The transmitted terahertz electric field is detected by a photoconductive antenna made from low-temperature grown gallium arsenide [11], with a silicon lens attached for enhanced collection efficiency. The entire system is flushed with dry nitrogen to remove the influence of water absorption. A usable bandwidth between approximately 300 GHz to over 5 THz is obtained, as shown in Fig. 1. The focus size in this setup is 870 μm (full width at half maximum (FWHM) of field amplitude), although lower regions of the spectrum exhibit a diffraction limited focus that is larger.

For the material analysis, reference transient measurements are taken without the sample inserted in the measurement system in order to be able to correct for the spectral depen-

dencies of the system. Transient measurements are then taken, with the sample placed in the terahertz beam path under normal incidence. A series of ten sample and reference measurements is taken to reduce and to quantify experimental errors. The ratio of the complex Fourier transforms of sample $E(\nu)$ and reference $E_{\text{ref}}(\nu)$ signals provides the complex transmissivity $t(\nu)$, which is a direct measure of the complex refractive index $\tilde{n}(\nu) = n(\nu) - ik(\nu)$ of the analyzed sample at the respective frequency ν . Fresnel equations including Fabry–Perot effects yield [12]

$$t(\nu) = \frac{E(\nu)}{E_{\text{ref}}(\nu)} = \frac{4\tilde{n}}{(\tilde{n} + 1)^2} \cdot \exp\left(-i \frac{2\pi\nu \cdot (\tilde{n} - 1) \cdot d}{c}\right) \bigg/ \left(1 - \frac{(\tilde{n} - 1)^2}{(\tilde{n} + 1)^2} \cdot \exp\left(-i \frac{4\pi\nu \cdot \tilde{n} \cdot d}{c}\right)\right) \quad (1)$$

for a slab of material of thickness d . Hence, as the experiments deliver both the real and imaginary components of $t(\nu)$, both the real and imaginary components of $\tilde{n}(\nu)$ (or other quantities like $\epsilon_1(\nu)$ and $\epsilon_2(\nu)$ or $\tan(\delta)$ can directly be determined. Appropriate numerical approaches are described in [13] and [14]. The only source of systematic error in this and, more generally, in any type of terahertz transmission experiments to evaluate dielectric properties, is the difficulty of precisely accounting for scattering effects. As a result of this, a fraction of the terahertz pulses might scatter out of the detection path and, therefore, indicate a larger loss tangent than the true value. Nevertheless, scattering is expected to be small in these experiments, given the large aperture of the detection system (30°) and the homogeneity of the samples on the spatial scale of the applied wavelengths (50 μm–3 mm). Experiments with varying detection apertures confirm this conjecture.

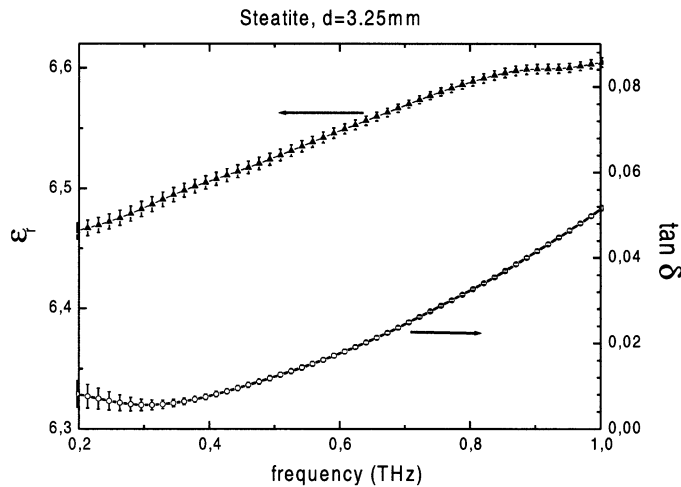


Fig. 2. Average and standard deviation of the real part of the dielectric constant, and loss tangent for the steatite sample.

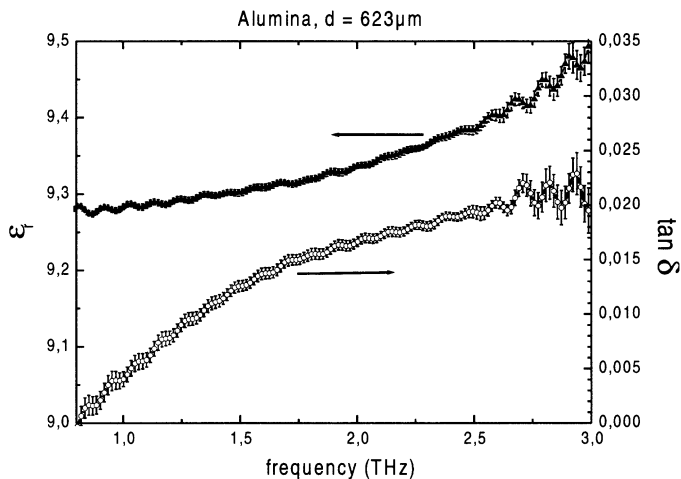


Fig. 3. Average and standard deviation of the real part of the dielectric constant, and loss tangent for the alumina sample.

III. EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Several materials were selected, which seem promising for manufacturing terahertz components, given their low cost, simple processing, reproducible parameters, and ready availability. The following four materials, besides silicon, have been measured with dielectric constants ranging from 6 to 90:

- 1) steatite (real part of epsilon \approx 6.5);
- 2) alumina (Al_2O_3 , real part of epsilon \approx 9.7);
- 3) titania loaded polystyrene (real part of epsilon \approx 16);
- 4) two versions of zirconium–tin–titanate (Zr SnTiO_3 , real part of epsilon \approx 36 and 90).

Of these materials, alumina is the most common. All dielectric ceramics are nontoxic and nonhazardous and no special handling or storage precautions are required. The higher dielectric-constant materials are slightly granular.

The measured dielectric constants and loss tangents of the samples are shown in Figs. 2–6. Figs. 2–5 show the average and standard deviation for the dielectric constant and loss tangent determined from ten consecutive measurements on individual samples. The error bars constitute, therefore, an indication for all statistical errors of the measurement approach. Fig. 6

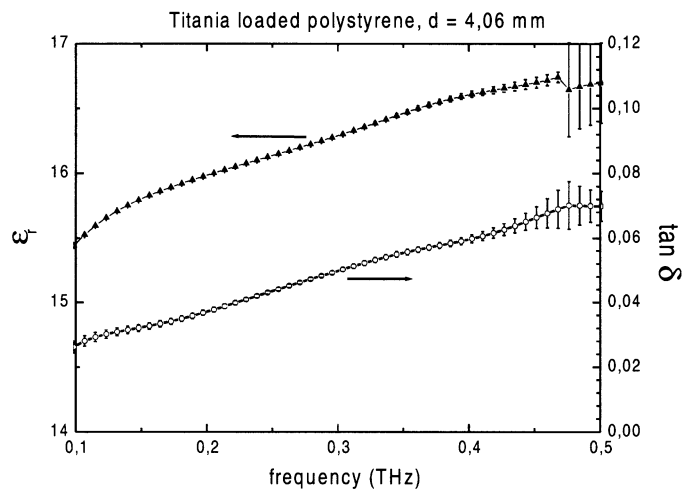


Fig. 4. Average and standard deviation of the real part of the dielectric constant, and loss tangent for the titania in polystyrene matrix sample.

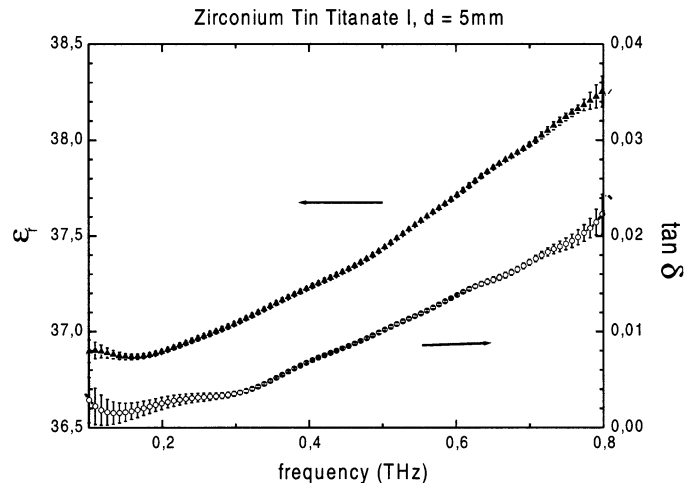


Fig. 5. Average and standard deviation of the real part of the dielectric constant, and loss tangent for the zirconium–tin–titanate I sample ($\epsilon_r \approx 37$).

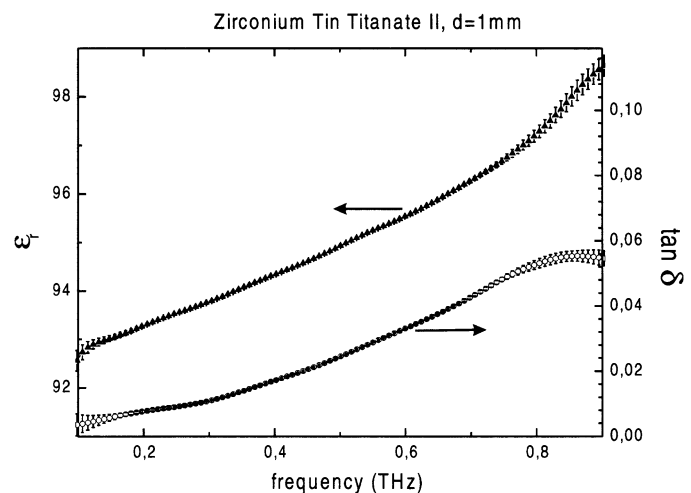


Fig. 6. Average and standard deviation of the real part of the dielectric constant, and loss tangent for a set of three zirconium–tin–titanate II samples ($\epsilon_r \approx 90$).

shows the average and standard deviation from three nominally identical samples, in order to quantify parameter variations in a set of samples. The reproducibility of the results was confirmed

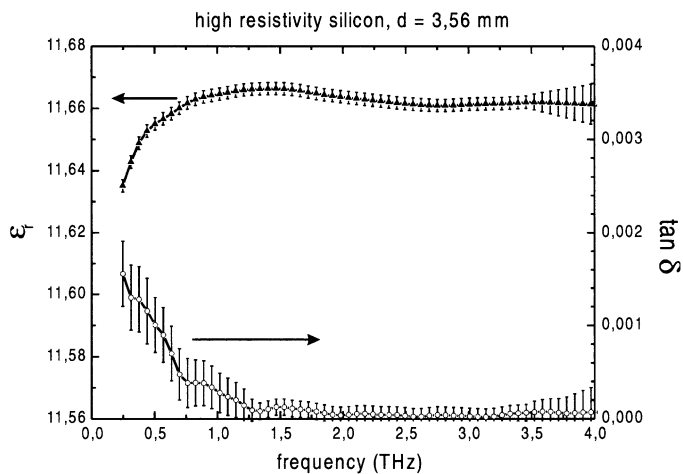


Fig. 7. Average and standard deviation of the real part of the dielectric constant, and loss tangent for the high-resistivity silicon sample.

by repeating the measurements at different sample locations. All samples exhibited a very high homogeneity. Fig. 7 shows measurements performed on high-resistivity crystalline silicon (epsilon \approx 11.6), which, despite of a higher cost, is known to be an excellent dielectric material at terahertz frequencies [15]–[17]. The experiments on silicon were performed in a collimated beam configuration in order to enhance the measurement accuracy and enable the measurement of the extremely low losses of this material.

The presented spectra have varying spectral ranges for the different samples, as only spectral information with an adequate signal-to-noise ratio of greater than 20 dB was taken for evaluating material parameters. Due to the available sample thickness, only a restricted region of the 5-THz system bandwidth was, therefore, utilizable. The measurement accuracy varies accordingly with sample thickness and spectral position. For example, the zirconium–tin–titanate samples presented in Fig. 6 have a standard deviation of 0.13 % (6 %_o) for the real part (or $\tan \delta$) of the dielectric constant observed at the central spectral range, which degrades down to 2 % (43 %_o) at the spectral edges of the measurement bandwidth. The data quality of this three-sample average indicates not only the adequacy of the experimental approach, but also excellent sample homogeneity. Most samples show a nearly linear positive dependence on frequency of both the real part of the dielectric constant and loss parameters, eventually indicating the presence of higher frequency resonances, or the onset of Rayleigh scattering. This increasing losses at higher frequencies are particularly noteworthy in comparison to the high-resistivity crystalline silicon data shown in Fig. 7, which excels with respect to losses, especially at higher frequencies. One should note that the silicon loss values measured here ($\alpha \approx 0,05 \text{ cm}^{-1}$, increasing toward lower energies up to $\alpha \approx 0,3 \text{ cm}^{-1}$) agree with the ones given in [15], but are significantly higher than the low-frequency values reported in [16]. One should also take notice that the oscillatory modulation on the data derived for the alumina sample depicted in Fig. 3 is an experimental artefact due to the thin sample thickness, which prevents a precise separation of different Fabry–Perot reflection orders. The oscillations are, however, on the order of the standard deviation of the measurements.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

An analysis of low-cost high-dielectric constant materials has been presented. All materials that were tested exhibited low losses, with loss-tangent values ($\tan \delta$) typically in the order of 0.02 with a tendency toward higher losses up to 0.06 at higher frequencies. Alumina stands out in comparison to the other low-cost dielectric materials with respect to losses, exhibiting a continuously low-loss tangent <0.02 up to 3 THz, followed closely by the zirconium–tin–titanate sample with a dielectric constant of 37. The presented materials offer a wide range of real parts of the dielectric constants (ϵ') on the order of 6.5, 9.3, 16, 37, and 93 for the respective materials and, therefore, can provide solutions to numerous engineering requirements. All materials are low cost and processable in order to enable the development of cost effective photonic crystal components in the terahertz spectral range.

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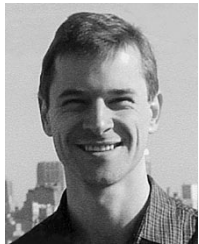


Peter Haring Bolivar was born in Mexico City, Mexico, in 1969. He studied electrical engineering at the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH) Aachen, Aachen University, Aachen, Germany, from 1987 to 1992.

During his thesis research, he made the first observation of Bloch oscillations, a fundamental phenomenon predicted since the beginnings of the 20th century. From 1992 to 1993, he was Head of the Rescue Equipment Division, Nautica Diesel Europea, Mexico City, Mexico. From 1993 to

1996, he was a Scientific Assistant with the Institut für Halbleitertechnik II, RWTH Aachen, where he was involved with conjugated polymers and femtosecond dynamics in semiconductors. From 1997 to 2001, he was Head of ultrahigh-frequency research with the Institut of Semiconductor Electronics, RWTH Aachen, where he directed applied and fundamental scientific research on coherent terahertz spectroscopy and ultrahigh-frequency optical characterization of electronic gigahertz devices. Since 2001 he has been Head of research at the RWTH Aachen, with ample activities in the fields of optoelectronics, ultrafast science, ultrahigh-frequency devices, optical data storage, and nanotechnology. He has authored or coauthored over 100 publications and international conference presentations and four book contributions. He holds two patents.

Dr. Haring Bolivar was the recipient of a Heinrich Hertz Fellowship from the Science and Research Ministry of the State of Northrhine–Westfalia and the Wilhelm Borchers Medallion of the RWTH Aachen.



Martin Brucherseifer was born on May 16, 1967, in Wissen, Germany. He received the Diploma degree and Doctor degree in electrical engineering from the Rheinisch-Westfälische Technische Hochschule (RWTH), Aachen, Germany, in 1997 and 2002, respectively.

He is currently with the Department of Physics and Engineering Physics, Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, NJ, where he is involved with free-space telecommunication in the far infrared and terahertz frequency range. His research has

comprised high sensitive and spatially resolved terahertz spectroscopy.



Jaime Gómez Rivas was born in Madrid, Spain, in August 1971. He received the M.S. degree in astrophysics from the University Complutense, Madrid, Spain, in 1995, and the Ph.D. degree in experimental physics from the University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in 2002. His doctoral dissertation concerned the propagation of light in strongly scattering semiconductors and localization of light.

From 1995 to 1996, he was with the Space Research Organization Netherlands (SRON), Utrecht,

The Netherlands, where he investigated the diffusion of quasi-particles in superconducting tunnel junctions for X-ray spectroscopy. In 1997, he joined the University of Amsterdam. Since August 2002, he has been with the Institute of Semiconductor Electronics, University of Aachen, Aachen, Germany.



Ramón Gonzalo (S'95–M'02) was born in Logroño, La Rioja, Spain, on July 15, 1972. He received the M.Sc. (with honors) and Ph.D. degrees from the Public University of Navarra (UPNa), Navarra, Spain, in 1995 and 2000, respectively, both in ingeniero de telecomunicación, and is currently working toward his Ph.D. degree in PBG structures for antenna applications in cooperation with the European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESTEC), Noordwijk, The Netherlands.

Since October 1995, he has been a Research Assistant with the Microwave Section, Electrical and Electronic Department, UPNa. His current area of research is in the field of photonic band structures with emphasis on space antenna applications, design of waveguide transmission lines, and corrugated horn antennas.

Mr. Gonzalo was the recipient of a 1997 grant from the Spanish Government to work at the European Space Agency–European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESA–ESTEC).

Iñigo Ederra was born in Isaba, Navarra, Spain, in 1972. He received the M.Sc. degree in telecommunication engineering from the Universidad Pública de Navarra, Navarra, Spain, in 1996, and is currently working toward the Ph.D. degree in Telecommunication Engineering at the Universidad Pública de Navarra.

In 1997, he joined the Antenna Group, Universidad Pública de Navarra. From 1999 to 2000, he was with the Antenna Section, European Space Agency–European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESA–ESTEC), Noordwijk, The Netherlands, where he was involved with the modeling of photonic crystals and their applications in the field of antennas. His research interests are in the field of photonic crystals and their applications in microwave and millimeter-wave components and antennas.

Andrew L. Reynolds was born in Birmingham, U.K., in 1974. He received the European Master of electronics optoelectronics, M.Eng., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Glasgow, U.K., in 1996 and 2000, respectively.

In 1997, he spent one year as a Young Graduate Trainee with the Antenna Section, European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESTEC), Noordwijk, The Netherlands. His research interests are focused on photonic-bandgap materials to antenna and opto-electronic applications.

M. Holker, photograph and biography not available at time of publication.



Peter de Maagt (S'88–M'88–SM'02) was born in Pauluspolder, The Netherlands, in 1964. He received the M.Sc. and Ph.D. degrees from the Eindhoven University of Technology, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, in 1988 and 1992, respectively, both in electrical engineering.

He is currently with the European Space Agency–European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESA–ESTEC), Noordwijk, The Netherlands. His research interests are in the area of millimeter- and submillimeter-wave reflector and planar integrated antennas, quasi-optics, photonic-bandgap antennas, and millimeter- and submillimeter-wave components.

Dr. de Maagt was the corecipient of the H. A. Wheeler Award presented by the IEEE Antennas and Propagation Society (IEEE AP-S) for the best applications paper of 2001. He was also the recipient of a 2002 ESA Award for Innovation.