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**Zhu et al.**

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(54) **DISPLACEMENT SENSOR**  
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(\* ) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 379 days.

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**Related U.S. Application Data**

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(51) **Int. Cl.**  
**G01B 7/14** (2006.01)  
**G01B 7/30** (2006.01)

(57) **ABSTRACT**

(52) **U.S. Cl.** ..... **324/207.17; 324/207.24; 324/658**

Sensors and methods for measuring displacement are disclosed. In one embodiment, among others, a resistive element is configured to receive an alternating voltage between a first and second electrical terminals defining a length of the resistive element. A signal pickup is capacitively coupled to the resistive element and is configured to be moved along the length of the resistive element at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive element and without contact between the resistive element and the signal pickup. A shielded cable, such as a coaxial cable, electrically connected to the signal pickup carries a signal having an amplitude proportional to the position of the signal pickup with respect to the first and second electrical terminals.

(58) **Field of Classification Search** ..... **324/207.12, 324/207.15–207.19, 207.22, 207.24–207.25, 324/225, 658, 659, 686**

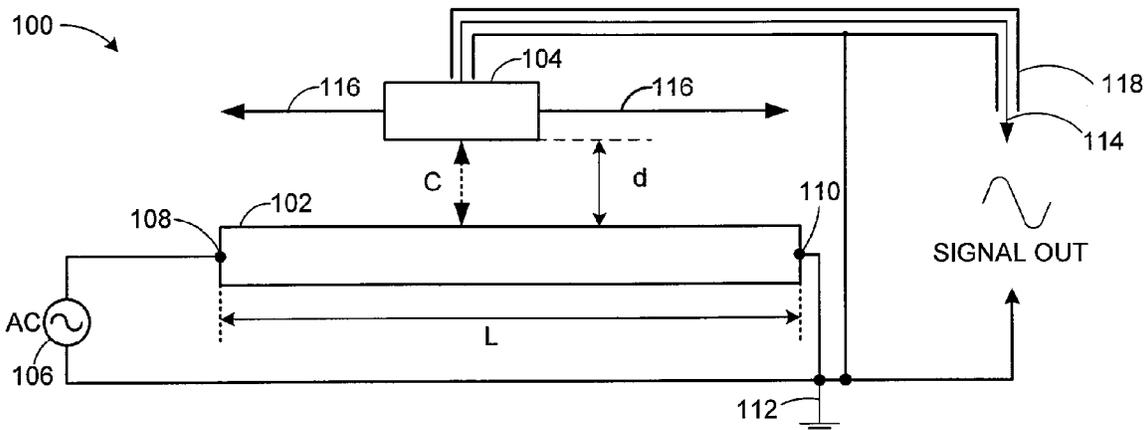
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**40 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets**



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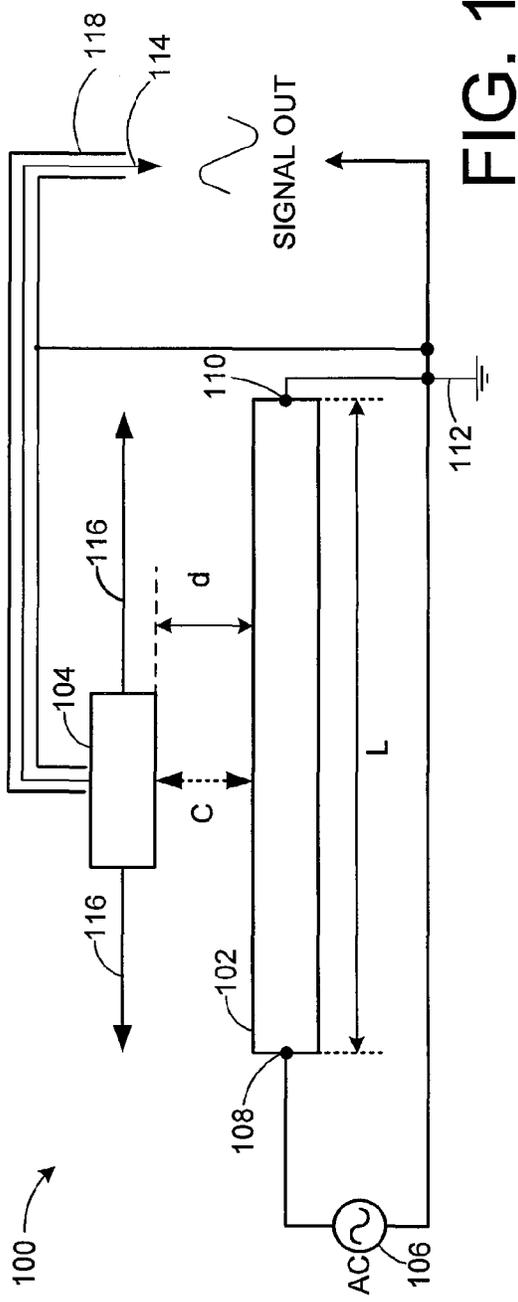


FIG. 1

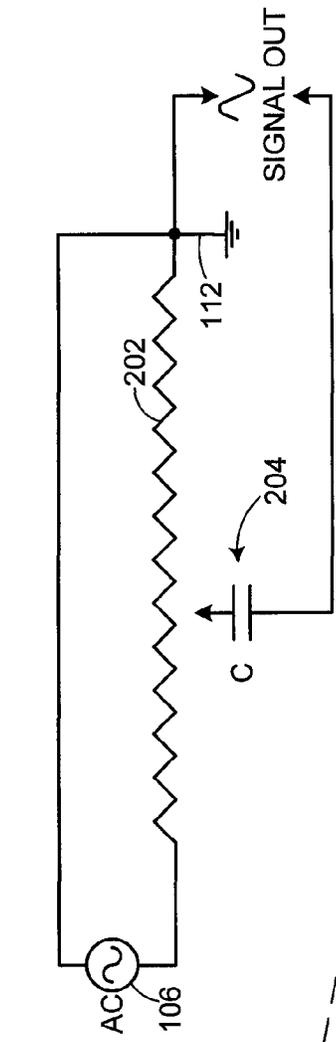


FIG. 2

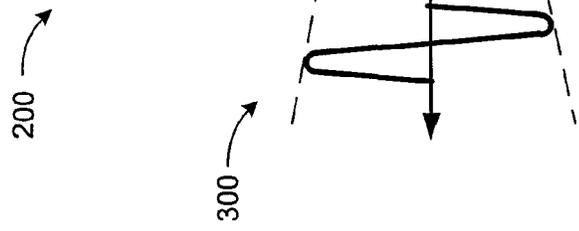


FIG. 3

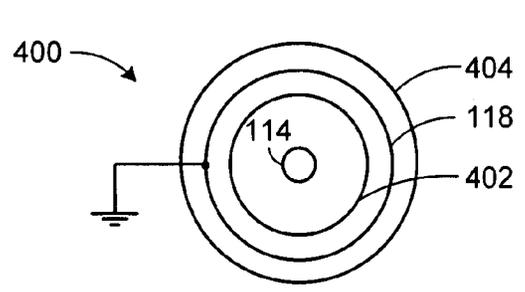


FIG. 4A

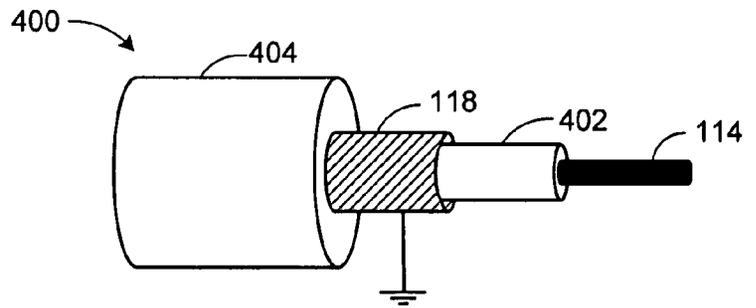


FIG. 4B

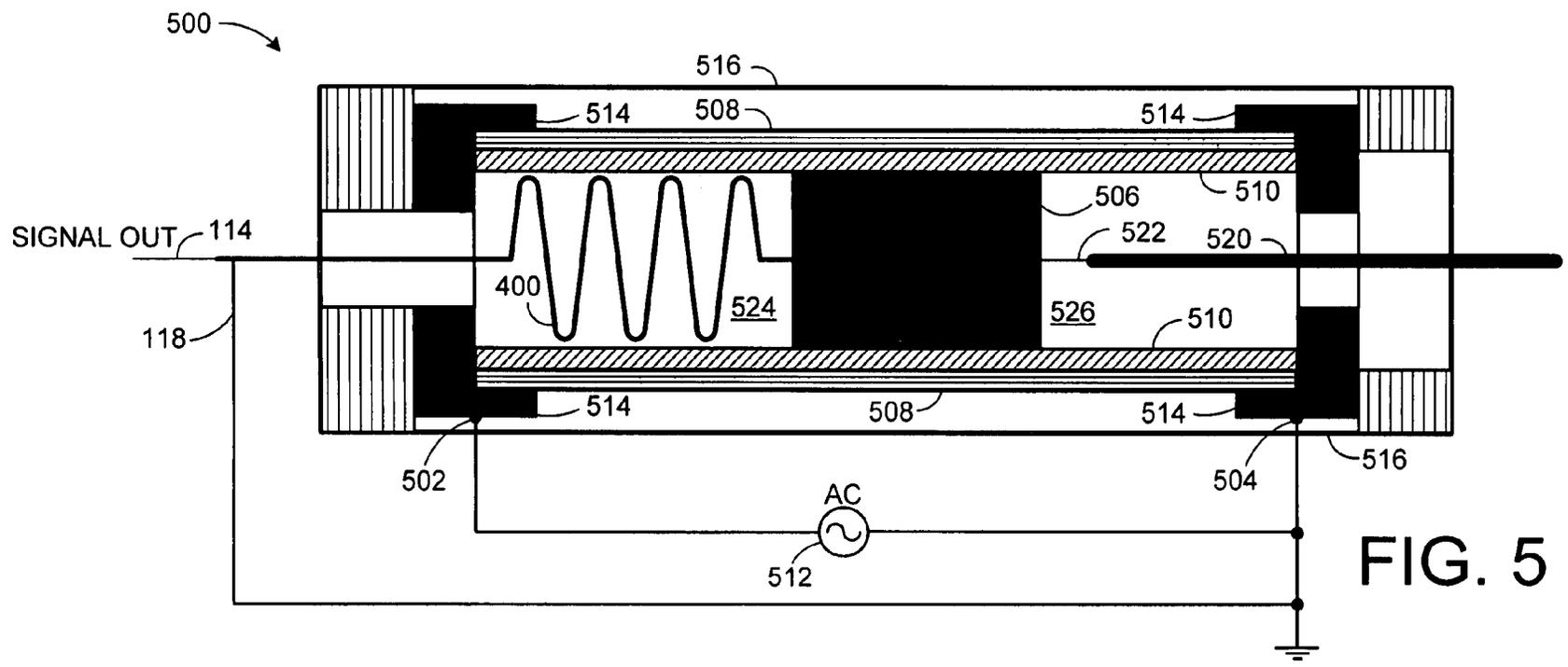


FIG. 5

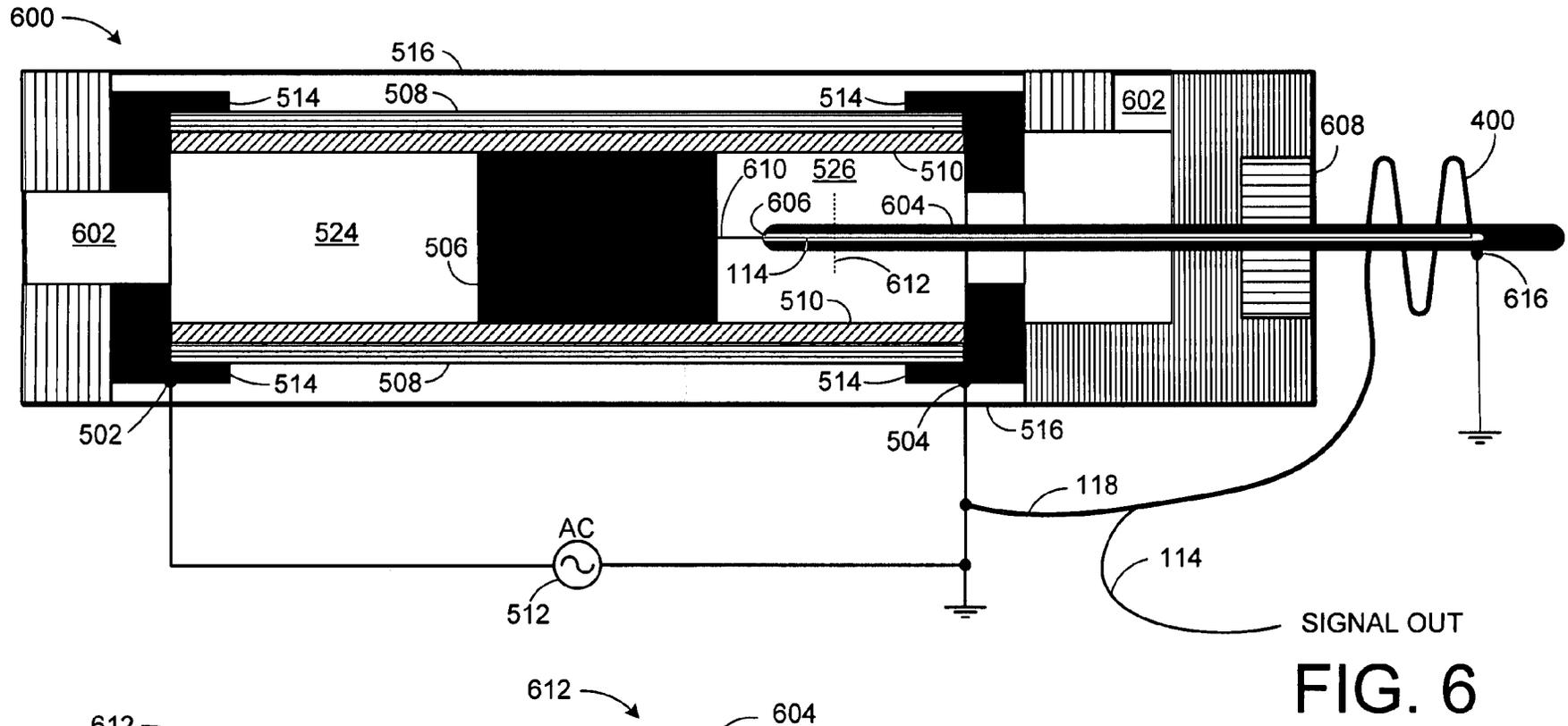


FIG. 6

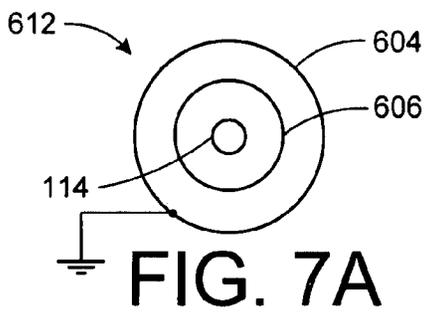


FIG. 7A

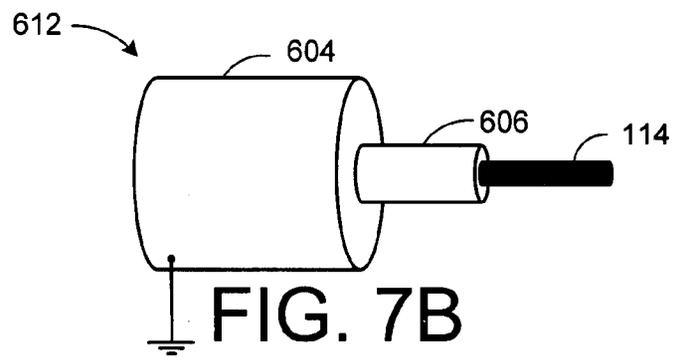
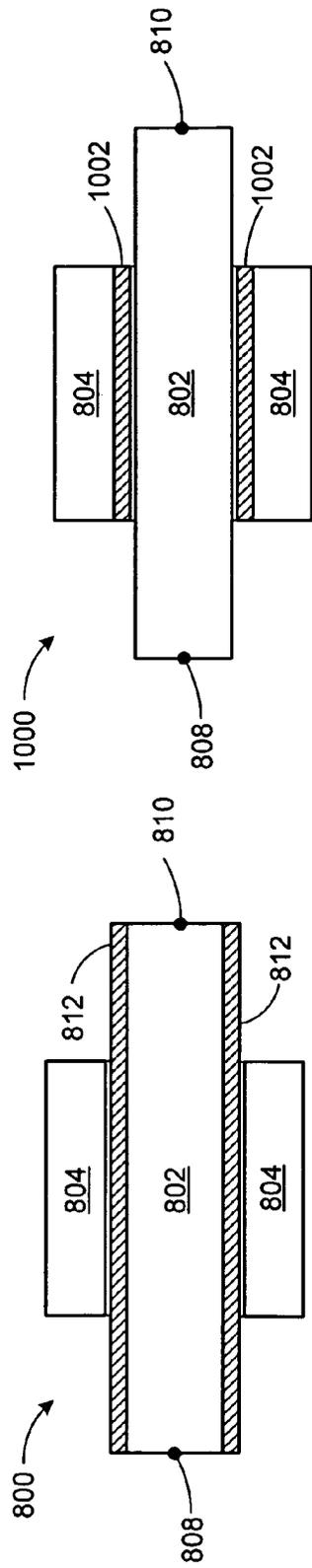
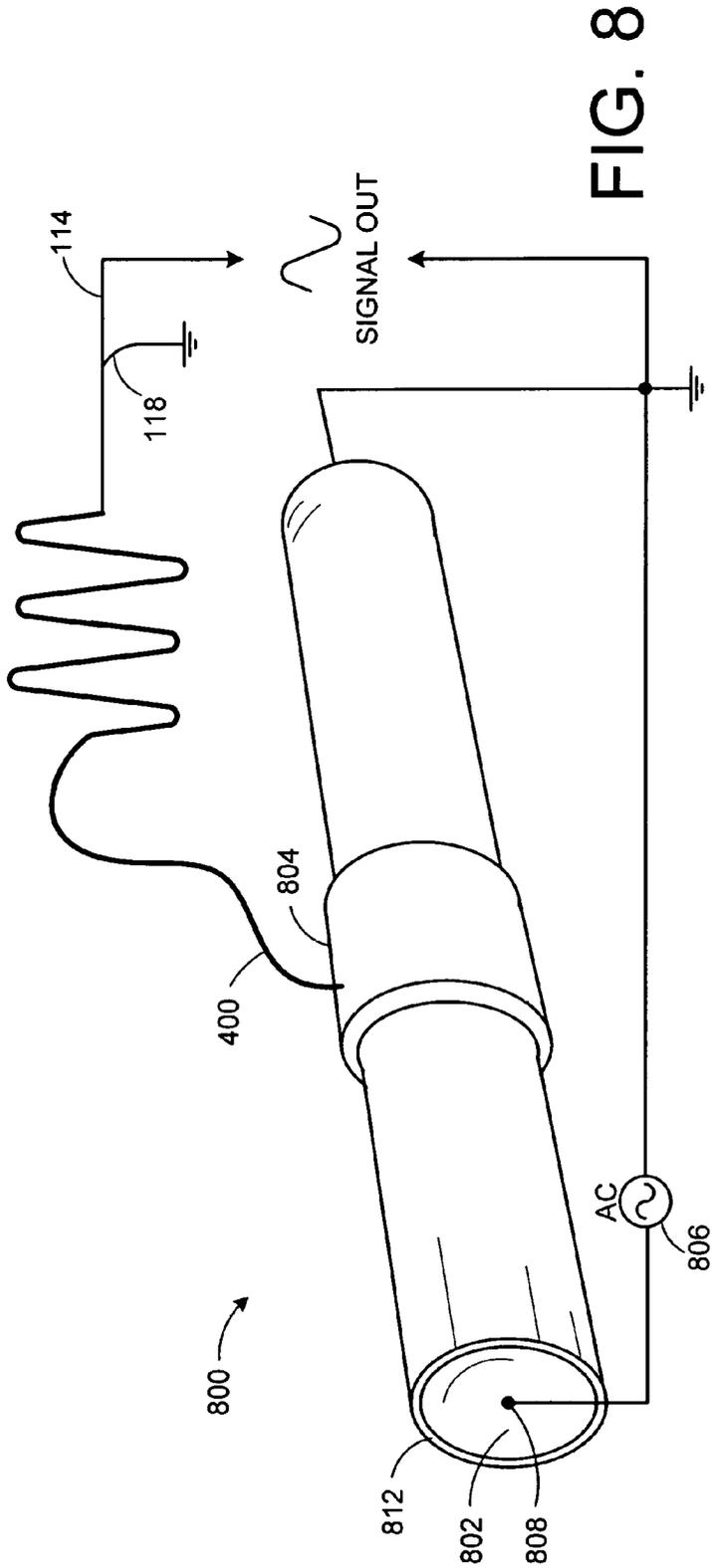


FIG. 7B



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**DISPLACEMENT SENSOR****CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

This application claims priority to and benefit of U.S. Provisional Patent Application entitled "Displacement Sensor Embedded Cylinder and Novel Displacement Sensor," assigned Ser. No. 60/622,285, and filed on Oct. 26, 2004, which is incorporated by reference in its entirety.

**STATEMENT REGARDING FEDERALLY SPONSORED RESEARCH OR DEVELOPMENT**

The U.S. Government may have a paid-up license in this invention and the right in limited circumstances to require the patent owner to license to others on reasonable terms as provided for by the terms of Contract No. NS-0121663, awarded by the National Science Foundation.

**BACKGROUND****1. Technical Field**

The present disclosure generally relates to displacement sensors, and more specifically, to non-contacting displacement sensors.

**2. Description of the Related Art**

Displacement sensors can be widely used in a number of industrial applications. Conventional displacement sensors have a variety of structures and working principles. For example, conventional displacement sensors include contacting potentiometers (e.g. resistance sensors), inductance sensors (e.g. Linear Variable Differential Transformer (LVDT) sensors and eddy current sensors), and non-contacting potentiometer displacement sensors.

A contacting potentiometer has a simple and low-cost structure. However, because this type of sensor includes a moving wiper that constantly contacts a resistive surface, a contacting potentiometer suffers from a limited life span, poor environmental resistance, and a degradation of the output signal over the sensor's lifetime.

An inductance sensor, on the other hand, is a type of non-contacting sensor, and thus does not suffer from the drawbacks of the contacting potentiometer. The most widely used inductance sensor is an LVDT sensor, which is extremely precise and can have a long useful lifetime. However, to improve linearity, LVDT sensors typically include three electromagnetic coils. These coils can be difficult and costly to manufacture. In addition, the plunger is comprised of ferrite material which exhibits poor resistance to some environments, such as acidic environments.

One embodiment of a non-contacting potentiometer sensor is described on the world-wide web page of Novotechnik of Ostfildern, Germany (<http://www.novotechnik.com/>). The structure consists of two parallel tracks and a moveable element for capacitively coupling the tracks. The two tracks consist of a first resistive track and a second low ohm collector track. An alternating current (AC) power source supplies a voltage across the resistive track. As the moveable element translates across the two tracks, evaluating electronics pick up a voltage signal from the collector track. However, the device suffers from a coupling capacitance between the collector track and the resistive track, as well as stray capacitance, which corrupts the output signal. Novotechnik apparently sells a device which uses a feedback loop to adjust the supply voltage signal in an attempt to compensate for the coupling capacitance. However, the device can be complicated to

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manufacture and does not completely account for the interference from stray capacitance and capacitive coupling between the resistive and collective tracks.

Another approach is described in U.S. Pat. No. 5,079,500 (the '500 patent), which describes yet another non-contacting potentiometer circuit arrangement. The potentiometric circuit arrangement is based on a resistive potentiometer track and a capacitively coupled wiper. The resistive track is driven by switched alternating voltages of  $+/-V$  and  $-/(X-V)$ , where  $X$  is a reference voltage and  $V$  is the output of an integrator to which the voltage sensed by the wiper, and rectified, is applied. A null voltage point establishes itself at the position of the wiper and stabilizes the integrator output at a direct current (DC) voltage proportional to the distance of the wiper from the track end. Any wiper displacement taps a non-null signal which, integrated, applies new voltages to the track until the null point is re-established at the wiper position. The circuit arrangement partially accounts for signal noise through the use of a feedback loop for altering the input voltage across the track. In addition, a preamplifier attached to the wiper amplifies the signal to mitigate signal noise induced by electromagnetic signals from other objects.

Conventional displacement sensors may be used in conjunction with a hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder to determine the displacement of the piston. However, such use typically comprises a standalone displacement sensor in conjunction with a conventional hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder. Therefore, the resulting cylinder structure can be very complex, causing an associated cost of manufacture to be relatively high. Adding the displacement sensor to the hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder can also increase the size of the cylinder, making them impractical for many applications.

Accordingly, what is needed is a non-contacting sensor structure that can achieve a precise output signal with low noise and without the use of a feedback circuit to account for stray and/or coupling capacitance. Further, a non-contacting sensor structure is needed that is simple in construction and does not need a preamplifier attached to the wiper for mitigating signal noise. Additionally, a non-contacting displacement sensor is needed that can inherently be used as a hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder, advantageously resulting in a hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder having the capability of providing a signal that can be used to determine the position of a piston within the hollow cavity of the cylinder, without a substantial increase in size or complexity from conventional hydraulic or pneumatic cylinders.

**SUMMARY**

One embodiment of a sensor for measuring displacement, among others, includes a resistive element configured to receive an alternating voltage between a first electrical terminal and a second electrical terminal. The first and second electrical terminals define a length of the resistive element. The sensor further comprises a signal pickup capacitively coupled to the resistive element, the signal pickup configured to be moved along at least a portion of the length of the resistive element at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive element and without contact between the resistive element and the signal pickup. The sensor also includes a shielded wire electrically connected to the signal pickup, the shielded wire carrying a signal having an amplitude proportional to a position of the signal pickup with respect to the first and second electrical terminals.

An embodiment of a method for measuring displacement, among others, includes the steps of applying an alternating voltage having a substantially fixed amplitude between a first

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electrical terminal and a second electrical terminal of a resistive element, the first and second electrical terminals defining a length of the resistive element. The method further includes determining the position of a signal pickup in relation to the length of the resistive element based on an amplitude of an output signal obtained from the signal pickup, the signal pickup being capacitively coupled to, and moveable along, at least a portion of the length of the resistive element.

An embodiment of a cylinder, among others, comprises a cylinder body forming a cylindrical hollow chamber for receiving a fluidic medium, the body comprising at least a resistive layer of a substantially uniform thickness, the resistive layer having a first and a second electrical terminal for receiving an alternating voltage. The cylinder further includes a piston fitted to the inside of the hollow chamber of the cylinder body and capacitively coupled to the resistive layer, the piston configured to be moved along at least a portion of the longitudinal axis of the cylinder body at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive layer and without contact between the resistive layer and the piston. A conducting element electrically connected to the piston for carrying a signal having an amplitude proportional to a position of the piston with respect to the first and second electrical terminals of the resistive layer.

One embodiment of a sensing system, among others, comprises a signal pickup capacitively coupled to a resistive element. The signal pickup is moveable along a length of the resistive element. The system includes a conductive element electrically coupled to the signal pickup for carrying a voltage signal sensed from the signal pickup to a signal output. The system also includes a conductive shield forming a layer around, and insulated from, the conductive element. The conductive shield extends along a length of the conductive element, the length defined by a first position near the signal pickup and a second position near the signal output.

Other systems, methods, features and/or advantages will be or may become apparent to one with skill in the art upon examination of the following drawings and detailed description. It is intended that all such additional systems, methods, features and/or advantages be included within this description and be protected by the accompanying claims.

#### BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The components in the drawings are not necessarily to scale relative to each other. Like reference numerals designate corresponding parts throughout the several views.

FIG. 1 depicts a side view of one embodiment of a non-contacting displacement sensor.

FIG. 2 depicts a simplified circuit diagram of the non-contacting displacement sensor of FIG. 1.

FIG. 3 depicts a simplified representation of the amplitude of the alternating current signal output from the non-contacting displacement sensor of FIG. 1, as the signal pickup moves along the length of the resistive element of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4A depicts a cross-sectional view of an embodiment of a coaxial cable that may be used to shield a wire of the displacement sensor of FIG. 1.

FIG. 4B depicts a longitudinal view of the coaxial cable of FIG. 4A.

FIG. 5 depicts a cut-away, side view of another embodiment of a non-contacting linear displacement sensor having a similar displacement sensing principle of the displacement sensor of FIG. 1.

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FIG. 6 depicts a cut-away, side view of another embodiment of a non-contacting displacement sensor similar to that of FIG. 5, comprising an embedded hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder.

FIG. 7A depicts a cross-section view of the rod depicted in FIG. 6, with a view of the embedded insulating tube and wire.

FIG. 7B depicts a longitudinal, cut-away view of the portion of the rod depicted in FIG. 7A.

FIG. 8 depicts a perspective view of another embodiment of a non-contacting displacement sensor having a similar displacement sensing principle of the displacement sensor of FIG. 1.

FIG. 9 depicts a cut-away, side-view of the non-contacting displacement sensor of FIG. 8.

FIG. 10 depicts a cut-away, side-view of another embodiment of a non-contacting displacement sensor having a similar displacement sensing principle of the sensor of FIG. 8.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION

Embodiments of devices and associated methods for measuring displacement are described in detail below with reference to the figures briefly described above. Embodiments are described below as being “non-contacting” displacement sensors. As will become apparent, the term “non-contacting,” as referred here and known to those skilled in the art, refers to the lack of contact between a signal pickup and an associated resistive element to which the signal pickup is capacitively coupled. As described in the background, conventional potentiometers include an electrically conductive wiper that is in contact with a resistive track. While being of simple construction, a number of disadvantages of this continual contact preclude their use in many applications. Accordingly, non-contacting sensors, such as Linear Variable Differential Transformer (LVDT) sensors do not include a contacting wiper. However, non-contacting sensors, such as LVDT sensors, may include a signal pickup that moves along a path, and this signal pickup may lightly contact a track or other surface of the displacement sensor. However, this contact is not integral or even desirable to the measurement of the displacement of the sensor. This is also true of the non-contacting displacement sensor embodiments disclosed herein. Rather, reference to the non-contacting aspect of the described sensor embodiments below refer to the non-contact between the signal pickup and its associated resistive element, which creates a capacitive coupling between these respective elements.

Referring now to FIG. 1, a side view of an embodiment of a non-contacting sensor 100 for measuring displacement is depicted. As will become apparent, the general principles of operation of the sensor 100 can be applied to a number of potential sensor embodiments, including those described with respect to FIGS. 5-10.

Sensor 100 generally comprises a resistive element 102, a signal pickup 104, and an alternating voltage source 106. Signal pickup 104 could also be described as a signal pickup head, moveable signal pickup, or a displacement element.

In practice, signal pickup 104 may be connected, (e.g. physically, magnetically, etc.) to another moveable object for measuring the displacement of the moveable object. By determining the movement of the signal pickup 104 along the resistive element 102, the position of the moveable object can be determined. However, in some embodiments, the signal pickup 104 could be incorporated into the moveable object itself.

Resistive element 102 receives an alternating voltage, which may be provided by the alternating current (AC) source 106, between a first electrical terminal 108 and a second

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electrical terminal **110**. Electrical terminals **108** and **110** are electrical contact points (e.g. for a voltage source and/or ground), and are not limited to any specific physical structure. According to the embodiment of FIG. 1, the first terminal **108** is connected to AC source **106**, and the second terminal **110** is connected to ground **112**.

Terminals **108** and **110** define a length (L) of resistive element **102**, along which the signal pickup **104** may move to provide an output signal (“**SIGNAL OUT**”) capable of being used to determine the position of the signal pickup **104** along this length (L). Although FIG. 1 depicts the length (L) as being equal to the physical length of the resistive element **102**, the length (L) could be some length less than the total physical length of the element. Additionally, the signal pickup **104** could be configured to move along a portion of the total length of the resistive element **102**, between first and second terminals **108** and **110**, comprising less than the total length (L). The resistive element **102** may be selected and/or configured to provide a substantially uniform resistance across the length (L).

Signal pickup **104** is positioned a distance (d) above the resistive element, and without contact between the resistive element **102** and the signal pickup **104**. Preferably this distance is substantially fixed, with only minor variations, thereby providing a substantially constant capacitive coupling (C) between the resistive element **102** and the signal pickup **104**. Such displacement can be ensured, for example, by fixing the signal pickup **104** along a track running parallel to the resistive element **102**, and/or by providing a substantially uniform dielectric layer (e.g. glass, polymers, ceramics, and/or other insulators) between resistive element **102** and signal pickup **104**. An embodiment having a uniform dielectric layer could, for example, be applied to either one of, or both of, the resistive element **102** and the signal pickup **104**. Depending on the specific embodiment, the dielectric layer could be in any number of forms, such as, but not limited to, a cylinder, a strip, a core, or a coating.

Signal pickup **104** is moveable along a path **116** defined by at least the portion of the resistive element **102** defined by length (L). According to the embodiment of FIG. 1, this path **116** is depicted as being substantially linear. However, path **116** could potentially be of a number of shapes taken by the resistive element, which could be curved or U-shaped, among others.

Signal pickup **104** is electrically conductive and, upon resistive element **102** being energized with the alternating current, is capacitively coupled to the resistive element **102**.

Accordingly, an electrically conductive element such as wire **114**, may be electrically connected to signal pickup **104** for picking up the signal sensed by the signal pickup as a result of the capacitive coupling to resistive element **102**. Wire **114** may be made flexible to allow movement of signal pickup **104**.

FIG. 2 depicts a simplified circuit diagram **200** of sensor **100**. Resistor **202** represents the resistive element **102** of FIG. 1.

Capacitor **204** represents the capacitive coupling (C) between signal pickup **104** and resistive element **102**. FIG. 3 depicts a simplified representation **300** of the signal detected by the signal pickup **104**, transmitted along wire **114**, and sensed as the signal output (“**SIGNAL OUT**”) in FIGS. 1 and 2.

As depicted, the signal output is a waveform, and the waveform changes in amplitude in proportion to the position of the signal pickup **104** along the length (L) of the resistive element **102**. One skilled in the art would understand that the resistive properties of resistive element **104**, as well as the frequency

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and amplitude of alternating source voltage **106** can be selected to provide a desired waveform distribution.

Accordingly, as the signal pickup **104** moves along the length (L) of the resistive element **102** of FIG. 1, the amplitude of the resulting signal (“**SIGNAL OUT**”) at the signal output may be measured.

Thus, it can be said that the signal pickup **104**, and thus the wire **114**, carries a signal having an amplitude proportional to the position of the signal pickup with respect to the first and second electrical terminals.

Accordingly, because a 1:1 relationship exists between an associated amplitude of the signal and the position of the signal pickup **104** along the length (L) of the resistive element, the position of the signal pickup **104** along length (L) can be derived. For example, the position could be determined by multiplying the amplitude by a constant, or by using a lookup table that associates the amplitude with a position.

Advantageously, the position of the signal pickup **104** can be instantly determined upon applying the alternating voltage to the resistive element **102**. This benefit is unlike other forms of displacement measuring devices, such as linear encoders that lose their current position with respect to some other fixed position upon losing power.

FIG. 3, however, depicts the output signal of sensor **100** in a perfect circuit. That is, the exemplary signal is not depicted as suffering from potential signal defects that could be caused by, for example, stray capacitance or RF interference from AC source **106** and/or other objects or electrical devices near the sensor.

In particular, interference can be introduced to the signal transmitted through wire **114**, between the signal pickup **104** and the point at which the wire is tapped to measure the signal output (“**SIGNAL OUT**”).

Interference from stray capacitance and RF are the subject of the device of U.S. Pat. No. 5,079,500 which attempts to resolve such problems through the addition of bulky and relatively complex circuitry, as explained in the Background of the present disclosure.

However, according to embodiments of the described non-contacting sensor **100**, wire **114** may be shielded from electrostatic interference between the signal pickup **104** and the measurement point of the signal output along wire **114**. For example, the wire **114** may be a conducting wire of a shielded electrical cable.

The shielded electrical cable may, for example, include a electrically conductive shield **118** (FIG. 1).

The shielded electrical cable may, for example, be a coaxial cable. Although any number of coaxial cable embodiments may be used, an exemplary embodiment of a coaxial cable suitable for use with the embodiments described herein is depicted in FIGS. 4A and 4B. FIG. 4A provides a cross-sectional view, while FIG. 4B provides a longitudinal view.

Looking to FIGS. 4A and 4B, coaxial cable **400** may comprise the conducting wire (e.g. wire **114**) surrounded by a number of layers. For example, conducting wire **114** may be surrounded by an insulating (non-conductive) layer **402**. Insulating layer **402** may be further surrounded by conductive shield **118**, which may then be surrounded by an outer protective jacket **404**. The conductive shield **118** may include an electrical terminal for connection to ground, thereby providing the electrical shielding.

Conductive shield **118** could be in the form of a sheath or a spiral shield. The spiral shield may include a right hand spiral or a left hand spiral. A metalized copper tape may be applied over the shield to provide further EM shielding.

Because the signal pickup **104** is moveable along the resistive element **102** (which is stationary with respect to signal

pickup **104**), coaxial cable **400** may be of the highly-flexible type, allowing the cable to be easily coiled and/or bent while the signal pickup element translates. The material of the protective jacket can be selected to release stress and reduce fatigue failure when coaxial cable **400** bends. In addition, according to embodiments in which conducting shield **118** is a spiral shield, the direction of the spiral can be chosen according to the cable coil direction to reduce fatigue. For example, a right-hand spiral shield can be used if the cable is coiled left and working in a compression spring style, or a left-hand spiral shield can be used if the cable is to be coiled left-hand and working in an extension spring style, etc.

Accordingly, coaxial cable **400** provides electrostatic shielding of its conducting wire from the signal pickup to a position along wire **114** used to tap the resulting signal.

Such an embodiment does not require additional circuitry associated with the signal pickup (e.g. an amplifier), nor does it require a feedback loop for altering the characteristics of the alternating voltage applied to resistive element **102**. Rather, the alternating voltage signal applied to the first and second electrical terminals **108** and **110** can be held constant and not varied depending on the sensed signal from the signal pickup.

Although wire **114** is depicted as being shielded by conductive shield **118**, some embodiments may not require the use of an electrical shield at all. Additionally, portions of wire **114** may be shielded from EM interference using other shielding devices or methods.

Now that the basic principles of a non-contacting displacement sensor have been described with respect to the embodiments of FIGS. 1-3, another embodiment of a non-contacting linear displacement sensor having a similar working principle of the displacement sensor of FIG. 1 is described with respect to FIG. 5. Specifically, FIG. 5 depicts a cut-away, side-view of a cylindrical displacement sensor **500**.

Like the embodiment of FIG. 1, cylindrical displacement sensor **500** is capable of producing a signal ("SIGNAL OUT") that can be used to represent the location of a signal pickup along a length defined by a portion of the resistive element between first and second electrical terminals defining the length of the resistive element. However, according to the embodiment of sensor **500**, the signal pickup is an electrically conductive piston **506** and the resistive element is a resistance film **508** applied to the outer surface of an electrically non-conductive hollow tube **510**. Electrically non-conductive tube **510** may be, for example, a glass tube. The resistance film **508** may be applied such that it is of axially uniform thickness on the outer surface of tube **510**. Thus, the resistance film **508** can also be said to be in the shape of a hollow tube of slightly larger diameter than the tube **510**.

The resistance film **508** and the piston **506** are spaced at a substantially fixed distance by an insulating layer, which may be provided by the electrically non-conductive tube **510**. The diameter of the piston **506** is sized to be slightly smaller than the diameter of the inner surface of non-conductive tube **510**. The diameter of the piston **506** with respect to that of the inner surface of non-conducting tube **510** may, for example, provide a small gap between the outer surface of the piston **506** and the inner surface of the tube **510**, such that the piston **506** is loosely fitted and easily slides along the inner surface of non-conductive tube **510** while still maintaining a substantially constant distance from the resistive film **508**.

An AC source **512**, providing the input signal, is coupled across electrical terminals **502** and **504** of the electrically conductive cushions **514** located on each side of the tube **510**. Thus, AC source **512** provides an alternating voltage to resistive film **508** through electrical terminals **502** and **504** of electrically conductive cushions **514**. The contact points

between the electrically conductive cushions **514** and the resistive film **508** comprise the electrical terminals of the resistive film, to which the alternating voltage input signal is passed. Cushions **514** also provide some physical protection between a protective shell **516** and the tube **510**. The protective shell **516** may be formed from metal, polymer or other high strength material. The outside of the shell can be electrically conductive for grounding.

Piston **506** is electrically conductive and, upon resistive film **508** being energized with the alternating voltage, is capacitively coupled to the resistive film **508**. Accordingly, an electrically conductive element such as wire **114**, may be electrically connected to piston **506** for picking up the signal sensed by piston **506** as a result of the capacitive coupling to resistive film **508**.

As described with respect to the sensor **100** of FIG. 1, at least a portion of the wire **114** may be electrically shielded. For example, one embodiment shields wire **114** using the conductive shield **118** of a coaxial cable. (See, FIGS. 4A and 4B, for example). Accordingly, FIG. 5 depicts wire **114** as the conducting wire of a coaxial cable **400**. This can be particularly important for portions of wire **114** located within the tube formed by resistive layer **508**, because the wire **114** is subject to stray electrical signals introduced across resistive film **508**, among others. Accordingly, the conductive shield **118** of the coaxial cable may be connected to ground, thereby insulating wire **114** from interference. Wire **114** (and thus, coaxial cable **400**) may be coiled inside tube **510** such that piston **506** can move freely.

A rod **520** may be connected to piston **506**. Rod **520** includes a portion extending from the cylindrical body of the sensor **500**. Pressure applied to the rod **520** is translated to the piston **506**, causing piston **506** to move along the length of the tube **510** and resistive film **508**. Although rod **520** may be connected directly to piston **506**, according to some embodiments an insulating element may be positioned between the rod and the piston to provide electrical isolation between the piston and the rod.

For example, according to the embodiment of FIG. 5, rod **520** is connected to piston **506** through a flexible element **522**. The flexible element **522** may be made of insulating material to provide electrical isolation between piston **506** and rod **520** to decrease stray electrical signals that could be introduced from rod **520**. Flexible element **522** may, for example, be difficult to compress along its longitudinal axis (e.g. the same axis along which piston **506** moves), but allows for small misalignment between rod **520** and piston **506**, thereby potentially reducing the friction caused by misalignment between the piston **506** and the tube **510**.

The resulting sensor **500** has an equivalent circuit as described with respect to the circuit of FIG. 2, and the output signal ("SIGNAL OUT") will follow a distribution similar to that described and depicted in FIG. 3.

The hollow chamber inside the cylindrical body of sensor **500** is split between a rear cavity **524** and a front cavity **526**, the cavities being separated by the piston **506**. Although FIG. 5 depicts coaxial cable **400** being positioned within rear cavity **524**, it should be understood that coaxial cable **400** (and therefore wire **114**) can be attached to any location on the piston **506**. Accordingly, for example, the wire **114** could be electrically connected to the surface of piston **506** facing front cavity **526**, and a portion of the cable **400** could be positioned within the front cavity and routed out of the cylinder body of sensor **500** through a hole in a wall of the sensor (e.g. with the rod).

Additionally, according to some embodiments, the electrically non-conductive tube **510** with the resistive film **508**

could be replaced by a hollow tube constructed of resistive material. According to such an embodiment, the surface of piston **506** can be electrically insulated (e.g. with a layer of glass) from the hollow tube of resistive material to provide the capacitive coupling between the piston and the hollow tube of resistive material.

FIG. **6** depicts a cut-away, side view of another embodiment of a non-contacting linear displacement sensor similar to that of FIG. **5**, comprising an embedded hydraulic or pneumatic cylinder **600**. A number of features correspond to features already described with respect to FIG. **5**, and thus bear the same reference number. It should be understood that embodiments described with respect to sensor **500** are equally applicable to the cylinder **600**. However, different from the embodiment of sensor **500**, cylinder **600** depicts that one or more ports **602** for a receiving a fluidic medium can be included, which should be understood to include liquids and gasses, such as hydraulic fluid and/or air. Such an embodiment could be used with, for example, pneumatic actuators or shock absorbers, among others.

As mentioned above with respect to sensor **500**, wire **114** can be routed through the front chamber **526** instead of rear chamber **524**. FIG. **6** depicts one such example in which the conducting wire **114** is routed with a cylinder rod **604** to a portion of the cylinder rod extending outside of the body of the cylinder **600**. To isolate the fluidic medium from the outside of the cylinder **600**, a graphite seal ring **608** may be included to provide a seal between the cylinder rod **604** and the cylinder body.

Although wire **114** may be directly connected to piston **506**, according to the embodiment of cylinder **600**, a short flexible wire **610** may be positioned between piston **506** and wire **118**. The short flexible wire **610** is made electrically conductive to provide an electrical connection between piston **506** and wire **114**. Like the flexible element **522** of sensor **500**, the short flexible wire **610** is difficult to compress along its longitudinal axis (e.g. the same axis along which piston **506** moves), but allows for small misalignment between the rod and piston, thereby potentially reducing the friction caused by misalignment between the piston and the tube **510**.

According to embodiments similar to those described with respect to sensor **500**, wire **114** may be electrically shielded and a coaxial cable may extend from the flexible wire, or directly from piston **506**, and run along, or be embedded within, cylinder rod **604**. Cylinder rod **604** may be made hollow or include a cooperative groove for this purpose. As with the other embodiments using coaxial cables described herein, the wire **114** is shielded by the conductive shield of the coaxial cable.

According to the embodiment depicted in FIG. **6**, the cylinder rod **604** itself may be used as the electrical shield for the conducting wire **114** by itself, or in addition to other shielding such as a coaxial cable. Specifically, by way of example, cylinder rod **604** may be coaxially fitted with a hollow tube **606**, which may be formed from a non-conductive material (e.g. plastic, glass, etc.). The wire **114** may be coaxially fitted into the hollow interior of hollow tube **606**. The cylinder rod **604** may be electrically conductive to form the protective shield similar to that provided by the conducting shield of a coaxial cable. Accordingly, the cylinder rod **604** may also include a terminal **616** for connecting the rod **604** to ground.

FIG. **7A** depicts a cross section of rod **604**, taken along broken line **612**, while FIG. **7B** provides a cut-away longitudinal view. FIGS. **7A** and **7B** depict hollow cylinder rod **604** (forming the conductive shield), hollow tube **606** coaxially fitted within hollow cylinder rod **604** (providing an insulating

function), and wire **114** coaxially fitted within the hollow tube **606** (for transmitting the signal from the piston).

Looking back to FIG. **6**, at a position along the length of cylinder rod **604**, the wire **114** may be routed outside of the cylinder rod **604**. Because wire **114** is no longer electrically shielded by the cylinder rod **604**, a portion of the wire **114** routed outside of the cylinder rod **604** may be shielded from electrostatic interference. For example, again, coaxial cable **400** may be used for this shielding. Accordingly, the conductive shield **118** of coaxial cable **400** may be connected to ground and the wire **114** may be tapped for measuring the output signal ("SIGNAL OUT").

The displacement sensing principles are the same as described with respect to the sensor of FIG. **5**. Accordingly, after applying an alternating voltage across the resistive film **508**, the amplitude of the signal detected from the wire **114** can be used to determine the position of the piston **506** along the length of the resistive film **508**.

It should be understood that according to some embodiments, the electrically non-conductive tube **510** with the resistive film **508** could be replaced by a tube comprising a resistive material. According to such an embodiment, the surface of piston **508** could be electrically insulated (e.g. with a layer of glass or other insulator) from the tube of resistive material to provide the capacitive coupling between the piston and the resistive tube.

Additionally, embodiments using the sensor rod **604** as the conductive shield also apply to the embodiments of cylindrical displacement sensor **500**. For example, as with the cylinder **600**, the rod **520** of sensor **500** can be made hollow and made from conductive material. The flexible element **522** of sensor **500** can be made conductive and the signal conducting wire **114** can be attached to the flexible wire and routed coaxially through rod **520**. Accordingly, wire **114** can be isolated from the rod **520** with an insulator (e.g. a glass tube, air gap, and/or rubber ring). The rod **520** can be linked to the output signal ground for shielding and the signal on conducting wire **114** can be tapped for measuring.

Accordingly, as described above with respect to sensor **500**, it should also be understood that the position of the conductive wire within the cylinder (e.g. in the front chamber **526** or rear chamber **524**) and/or the attachment point to the piston can be varied. For example, cylinder **600** may include an embodiment in which the conducting wire is attached to, and positioned on, a surface of the piston **506** in the rear chamber **524**. Wire **114**, which may be the conducting wire of coaxial cable **400**, may then be routed outside of the cylinder **600** (e.g. through port **602** or a wall of the cylinder).

According to yet another embodiment of displacement sensor **500** and/or cylinder **600**, the insulating layer between the piston and resistive layer could be provided by one or more non-conductive (e.g. rubber) O-rings. For example, a first o-ring may be secured close to a first end of the piston and a second o-ring may be secured to a second end of the piston, both o-rings positioned between the piston and the inner cylinder wall. The first and second o-rings may provide both a seal between the piston and the hollow chamber, as well as the insulator for the capacitive coupling between the piston and the resistive element. Such an embodiment could be used with, or without, an additional insulation layer.

FIG. **8** depicts a perspective view of an embodiment of a rod-and-collar non-contacting displacement sensor **800** having a similar displacement measuring principle to the displacement sensor **100** of FIG. **1**. However, the resistive element of sensor **800** comprises a resistive rod **802** capacitively coupled to a signal pickup comprising a displacement collar **804**.

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Resistive rod **802** may be in a number of shapes, such as the cylinder depicted in FIG. **8**. Resistive rod **802** may be comprised completely of resistive material, or may include a substantially uniform layer of resistive material coating its outer surface. An alternating voltage, supplied by AC source **806**, is provided to first and second electrical terminals **808** and **810** (See FIG. **9**) of the resistive rod **802**.

The resistive rod **802** is capacitively coupled to the displacement collar through an insulating layer **812**. According to some embodiments, the insulating layer **812** may be deposited in a substantially uniform thickness along the surface of resistive rod **802**. For example, FIG. **9** depicts cut-away, side-view of the non-contacting displacement sensor of FIG. **8**, showing insulating layer **812** as being formed on the resistive rod **802**. According to some embodiments, as depicted with respect to the rod-and-collar sensor **1000** of FIG. **10**, an insulating layer **1002** may be formed on the inner surface of the displacement collar **804**. The insulating layer may also be applied to both the resistive rod **802** and the displacement collar **804**.

Looking back to FIG. **8**, wire **114** may be electrically connected to displacement collar **804** for picking up the signal sensed by the displacement collar **804** as a result of the capacitive coupling to resistive rod **802**. As with previously described embodiments, wire **114** may be shielded from electrostatic interference with conductive shield **118**. For example, wire **114** may be the conducting wire of coaxial cable **400**, and the conducting sheath **118** of the coaxial cable **400** may be connected to an electrical ground.

The displacement sensing principles are the same as that described with the sensor of FIG. **1**. Accordingly, after applying an alternating voltage across the resistive rod **802**, the amplitude of the signal (“**SIGNAL OUT**”) detected from the wire **114** can be used to determine the position of the displacement collar **804** along a length of the resistive rod **802**, between terminals **808** and **810**.

It should be emphasized that many variations and modifications may be made to the above-described embodiments. All such modifications and variations are intended to be included herein within the scope of this disclosure and protected by the following claims

Therefore, at least the following is claimed:

1. A sensor for measuring displacement comprising:
  - a cylindrical resistive element configured to receive an alternating voltage between a first electrical terminal and a second electrical terminal, the first and second electrical terminals defining an axial length of the resistive element;
  - a signal pickup capacitively coupled to the resistive element, the signal pickup configured to be moved along at least a portion of the axial length of the resistive element at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive element and without contact between the resistive element and the signal pickup; and
  - a shielded wire electrically connected to the signal pickup, the shielded wire configured to carry a signal obtained from the signal pickup, the signal having an amplitude proportional to an axial position of the signal pickup with respect to the first and second electrical terminals.
2. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the resistive element and the signal pickup are spaced at the substantially fixed distance by an insulating layer.
3. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the first terminal is a voltage source and the second terminal is an electrical ground.

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4. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the alternating voltage applied between the first and second terminals oscillates at a fixed frequency and amplitude.

5. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the resistive element is in the shape of a hollow tube and the signal pickup is in the shape of a cylinder, the signal pickup configured to move axially along a portion of the inside of the hollow tube shaped resistive element.

6. The sensor of claim **5**, wherein the resistive element and the signal pickup are spaced at the substantially fixed distance by an insulator.

7. The sensor of claim **6**, wherein the insulator is an axially uniform layer of nonconductive material coating the signal pickup.

8. The sensor of claim **6**, wherein the insulator is a nonconductive tube and the resistance element is an axially uniform layer of resistive material coating the nonconductive tube.

9. The sensor of claim **6**, wherein the sensor further includes a hollow rod having a first portion located within the hollow tube and attached to the signal pickup, and a second portion extending outside of the hollow tube, the rod configured to move axially with the signal pickup, and wherein a first portion of the shielded wire is positioned inside the first and second portions of the hollow rod, and a second portion of the shielded wire extends outside of the hollow rod.

10. The sensor of claim **9**, wherein the rod is electrically conductive and grounded to provide electrostatic shielding to the shielded wire.

11. The sensor of claim **6**, wherein the sensor further includes a rod having a first portion located within the hollow tube and attached to, but electrically isolated from the signal pickup, and a second portion extending outside of the hollow tube, the rod configured to move axially with the signal pickup, and wherein a first portion of the shielded wire is positioned inside the hollow tube and is electrically connected to the signal pickup, and a second portion of the shielded wire extends outside of the hollow tube.

12. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the shielded wire is a conducting wire of a coaxial cable, the coaxial cable including an electrically conductive shield and an insulating layer between the electrically conductive shield and the conducting wire.

13. The sensor of claim **12**, wherein the electrically conductive shield is connected to an electrical ground.

14. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the signal pickup is configured to move axially along a portion of the outside of the resistive element.

15. The sensor of claim **14**, wherein the signal pickup is a displacement collar.

16. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the resistive element comprises a resistive core.

17. The sensor of claim **1**, wherein the resistive element comprises a resistive layer of a substantially uniform thickness on an outer surface of the resistive element.

18. A method for measuring displacement comprising: applying an alternating voltage having a substantially fixed amplitude to a first electrical terminal of a tubular resistive element and electrically grounding a second electrical terminal of the tubular resistive element, the first and second electrical terminals defining an axial length of the resistive element; and

determining the position of a signal pickup in relation to the axial length of the resistive element based on an amplitude of an output signal obtained from the signal pickup,

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the signal pickup being capacitively coupled to, and moveable along, at least a portion of the axial length of the resistive element.

19. The method of claim 18, further comprising the step of: measuring the amplitude of the output signal through a flexible electrostatically shielded wire, the wire electrically connected to the signal pickup and electrostatically shielded by a conductive shield forming a layer around, and insulated from, the wire, the conductive shield extending along a length of the wire, the length defined by a first position near the signal pickup and a second position near the signal output.

20. The method of claim 19, further comprising the step of: moving the signal pickup along the portion of the axial length of the resistive element at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive element and without contact between the resistive element and the signal pickup.

21. The method of claim 18, wherein the resistive element has a circular cross-section.

22. A cylinder comprising:  
 a cylinder body forming a cylindrical hollow chamber for receiving a fluidic medium, the body comprising at least a resistive layer of a substantially uniform thickness, the resistive layer having a first and a second electrical terminal for receiving an alternating voltage;  
 a piston fitted to the inside the hollow chamber of the cylinder body and capacitively coupled to the resistive layer, the piston configured to be moved along at least a portion of the longitudinal axis of the cylinder body at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive layer and without contact between the resistive layer and the piston; and  
 a conducting element electrically connected to the piston for carrying a signal obtained from the piston, the signal having an amplitude proportional to a position of the piston with respect to the first and second electrical terminals of the resistive layer.

23. The cylinder of claim 22, further comprising an insulator between the piston and the resistive layer.

24. The cylinder of claim 23, wherein the insulator comprises a non-conductive tube inside the hollow chamber of the cylinder body, and the resistive layer comprises a resistance film deposited on the non-conductive tube.

25. The cylinder of claim 23, wherein the insulator is an insulating layer formed on an outer surface of the piston.

26. The cylinder of claim 23, wherein the cylinder further includes:  
 a hollow rod having a first portion located inside the cylindrical hollow chamber and attached to the piston, and a second portion extending outside of the cylindrical hollow chamber, the hollow rod configured to move axially with the piston, and wherein a first portion of the conducting element is positioned inside the first and second portions of the hollow rod, and a second portion of the conducting element extends outside of the hollow rod.

27. The cylinder of claim 26, wherein the hollow rod further comprises an insulating layer between the conducting element and the hollow rod.

28. The cylinder of claim 26, wherein at least the second portion of the conducting element is shielded by a conductive shield of a coaxial cable.

29. The cylinder of claim 26, wherein both the first and second portions of the conducting element are shielded by a conductive shield of a coaxial cable.

30. A system comprising:  
 a signal pickup capacitively coupled to a resistive rod, the signal pickup moveable along an axial length of the

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resistive rod, the axial length defined by a first electrical terminal and a second electrical terminal of the resistive rod;

a conductive element electrically coupled to the signal pickup for carrying a voltage signal sensed from the signal pickup to a signal output, the signal having an amplitude proportional to an axial position of the signal pickup with respect to the first and second electrical terminals; and

a conductive shield forming a layer around, and insulated from, the conductive element, the conductive shield extending along a length of the conductive element, the length defined by a first position near the signal pickup and a second position near the signal output.

31. The system of claim 30, wherein the resistive rod comprises a resistive core.

32. The system of claim 30, wherein the resistive rod comprises a resistive layer of a substantially uniform thickness on an outer surface of the resistive rod.

33. The system of claim 30, wherein the resistive rod has a circular cross-section.

34. The system of claim 30, wherein the signal pickup is a displacement collar.

35. A system comprising:  
 a tubular body forming a tubular hollow chamber for receiving a fluidic medium, the tubular body comprising at least a resistive layer of a substantially uniform thickness, the resistive layer having a first and a second electrical terminal for receiving an alternating voltage;  
 means for capacitively coupling to the resistive layer, the means for capacitively coupling fitted to the inside the hollow chamber of the tubular body, the means for capacitively coupling configured to be moved along at least a portion of the longitudinal axis of the tubular body at a substantially fixed distance from the resistive layer and without contact between the resistive layer and the means for capacitively coupling; and  
 means for carrying a signal obtained from the means for capacitively coupling, the means for carrying the signal electrically connected to the means for capacitively coupling, the signal having an amplitude proportional to a position of the piston with respect to the first and second electrical terminals of the resistive layer.

36. The system of claim 35, further comprising an insulator between the means for capacitively coupling and the resistive layer.

37. The system of claim 36, wherein the insulator comprises a non-conductive tube inside the hollow chamber of the tubular body, and the resistive layer comprises a resistance film deposited on the non-conductive tube.

38. The system of claim 36, wherein the insulator is an insulating layer formed on an outer surface of the means for capacitively coupling.

39. The system of claim 36, further comprising:  
 a hollow rod having a first portion located inside the tubular hollow chamber and attached to the means for capacitively coupling, and a second portion extending outside of the tubular hollow chamber, the hollow rod configured to move axially with the means for capacitively coupling, and wherein a first portion of the means for carrying a signal is positioned inside the first and second portions of the hollow rod, and a second portion of the means for carrying a signal extends outside of the hollow rod.

40. The system of claim 39, wherein the hollow rod further comprises an insulating layer between the means for carrying a signal and the hollow rod.

UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE  
**CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION**

PATENT NO. : 7,521,921 B2  
APPLICATION NO. : 11/259665  
DATED : April 21, 2009  
INVENTOR(S) : Zhu et al.

Page 1 of 1

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

Col. 5, line 67: delete "104" and replace with --102--

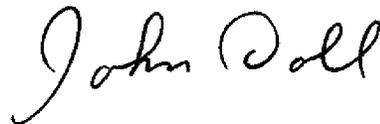
Col. 9, line 33: delete "118" and replace with --114--

Col. 10, line 23: delete "508" and replace with --506--

Col. 13, line 25 claim 22: delete "inside the" and replace with --inside of the--

Signed and Sealed this

Thirtieth Day of June, 2009



JOHN DOLL  
*Acting Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office*

UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE  
**CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION**

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APPLICATION NO. : 11/259665  
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Page 1 of 1

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

Column 1, Line 15, delete:

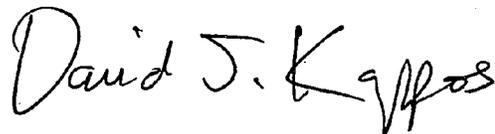
“The U.S. Government may have a paid-up license in this invention and the right in limited circumstances to require the patent owner to license to others on reasonable terms as provided for by the terms of Contract No. NS-0121663, awarded by the National Science Foundation.”

and insert with the following paragraph:

--This invention was made with U.S. Government support under agreement no. IIS-0121663, awarded by the National Science Foundation. The Government has certain rights in this invention.--

Signed and Sealed this

Sixteenth Day of March, 2010



David J. Kappos  
*Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office*