Smart Front-Ends, from Vision to Design

Arthur H.M. van ROERMUND†*, Peter BALTUS†, André van BEZOOLJEN††, Johannes A. (Hans) HEGT†, Emanuele LOPELLI†††, Reza MAHMOUDI, Georgi I. RADULOV†, and Maja VIDOJKOVIC†††, Nonmembers

SUMMARY An integral multi-disciplinary chain optimization based on a high-level cascaded Shannon-based channel modeling is proposed. It is argued that the analog part of the front-end (FE) will become a bottleneck in the overall chain. This requires a FE-centric design approach, aiming for maximizing the effective data capacity, and for an optimal exploitation of this capacity for given power dissipation. At high level, this asks for a new view on the so-called client-server relations in the chain. To substantiate this vision, some examples of research projects in our group are addressed. These include FE-driven transmission schemes, duty-cycled operation with wake-up radio, programmable FEs, smart antenna-FE combinations, smart and flexible converters, and smart pre and post correction.
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1. Introduction

Front-ends (FEs) form crucial blocks in any communication chain. This is especially true for wireless applications. Front-ends receive an antenna signal and recover the application bits from it, and vice versa. Note that in this definition of Front-end, the data converters are included. With the emergence of many new applications and standards, and the user demand to have everything done with just one single multi-purpose device, the front-end has to filter out one out of a bunch of channels, from an ever-more crowded frequency spectrum with an increasing number of interferers, and for a lot of different standards. The applications at the same time become more complex, requiring more and more data to be transmitted in the same time, and thus, higher data rates. And, to make the challenge even larger, the front-end has to be reliable, under more severe mobility conditions, its form factor has to decrease (smaller devices), and battery life time has at least not to diminish, meaning a severe reduction on power dissipation. From the transmission side we see a move upward in frequency, from the crowded lower bands to new bands around 60 GHz. That solves some capacity problems in the transmission channel, but it poses again a lot of extra challenges on the frontend, more specifically, on the analog part of the frontend, the AFE. This all causes the front-end to become the weakest link in terms of performance versus cost (power dissipation, chip area).

From this vision, we draw four conclusions:

1. An integral, multi-disciplinary and Shannon-based view is needed, on the whole communication chain, and on the relations in the chain, which we have named client-server relations [1].
2. A FE-driven system design is required, consequently with new client-server relations [1].
3. The FE should be conversion-driven: it should primarily focus on its fundamental ‘IC-channel modulation’ function, which is data conversion [2].
4. Front-ends need to become smart: comprise intelligence to adapt and optimize themselves under varying application, system, user and environment conditions [2], [3].

The research in our group is driven by this vision. This invited paper substantiates this vision by addressing some of our activities. The paper is set up as follows. In Sects. 2–4 we discuss the high-level concepts, in Sects. 5–9, several sub issues of our vision will be elucidated with activities, and, finally, conclusions are given in Sect. 10.

2. Shannon-Based View and Chain Modeling

Shannon and Hartley gave the well-known formula for the capacity C of a channel, see Fig. 1.

This capacity can be increased by increasing B and/or SNR; both require power and chip area because of physical laws. However, having this capacity is not enough; we should also exploit it by using appropriate modulation and coding. Finally, part of the capacity is consumed by margins that are taken into account in the design, to cover system imperfections (imperfections and constraints in processing, modeling, PVT, coding, signal processing, etc.), and interfering signals. Uncertainties, limited knowledge, but also costs are underlying reasons.

Hence, in view of the increase in data rates, we need to:

\[ C = B \log(1 + SNR) \]

Fig. 1 Effective data capacity, as a part of the Shannon capacity.
1) increase the capacity C;
2) exploit the effective capacity optimally; and
3) decrease the margins;
and all these issues cost power . . .

Expanding this model for the overall transmission chain leads to Fig. 2: a cascade of ‘transmission channel,’ analog-IC channel, and digital-IC channel. The analog-IC part will become the weakest link, in view of the trends addressed in the introduction, and of the following observations: any increase of capacity in free space is paid for by the transceiver in terms of power; with technology scaling, the capacity of the digital IC will increase whereas that of the analog IC part will decrease; and the required margins increase, especially for the analog part (more interferences, more parasitic effects at higher frequencies, more modeling uncertainty, etc.) [1]–[3].

3. FE-Centric Design Approach

With the analog-IC link being the bottleneck, we need a FE-centric design approach that primarily focuses on fighting this bottleneck. That can be done at system level, by optimizing the overall chain, by proper high-level partitioning and by defining proper ‘client-server’ relations (Sect. 4).

Following that line, we can define transmission schemes that are driven by the requirements of the FE, thus aiming for maximizing the capacity/cost of the AFE’-channel link, and on maximizing the exploitation of the capacity. Examples can range from choice of modulation type, to wake up radio, and cross-layer optimization (Sect. 5).

Complementary, we can tackle the margin problem to enhance the effective data capacity, and at the same time optimize the effective use of it. This path goes from programmable FEs, that can be adapted by the user to changing conditions (Sect. 6), to, finally, smart FEs, that can eliminate uncertainties by self-measuring, and that can autonomously adapt their operation, thus decreasing the margins, and increasing the ratio between effective data capacity and power dissipation. Examples will be given of smart antenna-FE combinations (Sect. 7), smart and flexible data converters (Sect. 8), and smart pre and post processing (Sect. 9).

4. FE-Driven System-Level Chain Design

To optimize the chain in favor of the weakest link, we first need to split the whole (hardware) chain into three parts, according to the previous split in the Shannon model of the chain. To do so, we need to consider the usually individual blocks antenna, AFE and AD/DA, as one functional block AFE’ with its primary focus on converting analog EM-fields to bits and vice versa. Figure 3 visualizes this view on future communication chains, with successively free-space transmission, AFE’, and digital processing block. The latter digitally assists the analog block (DAA), and provides digital IF (DIF), digital baseband (DBB), MAC, network, and application processing.

Next in the optimization of the chain, the AFE’ should be seen as a client that needs to be supported maximally by the other links of the chain. That brings us to new ‘client-server’ relations [1], represented by the arrows in the figure, where the AFE’ focuses on data conversion, which in fact comprises fundamentally all functionality required to change the input signals (EM fields) to the IC-optimized signal representation (the digital one), and vice versa, so to optimize for the IC-channel. For that purpose, the AFE’ should be optimally supported by the digital DAA block and the MAC/Network layer, and a front-end efficient transmission scheme should be defined. Modulation support for the free-space transmission (‘Transmission-driven support’) is shifted from the AFE’ to the digital block as far as it is not in line with the optimal conversion function [2].

5. FE-Driven Transmission Schemes

Defining optimal transmission schemes from a FE point of view, that minimize the cost for the AFE’, helps considerably in reducing the AFE’ bottleneck. Three examples will be given here.

5.1 FE-Driven FHSS Modulation

Wireless sensor networks must often work in a very hostile indoor environment. As any other channel medium, the indoor environment is noisy. The often used Industrial, Scientific and Medical (ISM) bands, like the 2.4 GHz and the 915 MHz bands, present an interference-crowded scenario which requires the capability to discern a weak transmitted signal among several stronger unwanted signals. Finally, the presence of objects creates a multipath interference, which translates in a spatial degradation of the SNR. This degradation can be as large as 20 dB or more and is often referred to as fading. These requirements make FE design quite tough. However, though the environment parameters are dictated by the application area required to be covered and they cannot change, several other parameters can be optimized in
order to minimize the impact of those non-idealities on the transceiver complexity and power consumption. Some of those parameters are the following:

- modulation format;
- system bandwidth;
- data transmission rate;
- transmitter/receiver architecture.

A FE-driven modulation format should be used to encode the information. The relative modulation complexity of various modulation schemes is shown in Fig. 4. In terms of AFE power consumption a robust, simple and constant-envelope modulation scheme is preferred. Phase-modulation schemes are constant envelope before filtering (adjacent channel filtering), but not anymore after it. This forces the PA to back-off during transmission reducing the PA efficiency. On-off keying (OOK), though very simple, is very weak in the presence of strong interferers [4]. Therefore, an FSK modulation format is the most suitable for this scenario. Furthermore, though a coherent FSK has a 3 dB SNR advantage over a non-coherent (NC) FSK, the much lower complexity of NC-FSK allows for a larger reduction of the overall power consumption.

The choice between narrowband and wideband FSK is also FE-driven. For the receiver, in order to save power and area, a zero-IF topology is preferred. Unfortunately this suffers from some non-idealities producing a DC offset. In order to easily reject it, it is preferable that the signal has no information around DC. Therefore, a wideband FSK is an optimal choice for a zero-IF receiver.

System bandwidth (bandwidth used on the average for the data transmission) and data rate can also be FE-driven. First, we divide between narrowband and wideband systems. The so called spread-spectrum (SS) systems form a specific class of wideband systems. They allow to trade bandwidth for robustness, assuming low data-rate transmission, generally ranging between 1 kbps and 50 kbps. Moreover, as a narrowband filter can be used, the amount of noise is very low. Therefore, for a given SNR required by the modulation format, the transmitted power can be drastically reduced. Two main SS techniques are generally used: Direct Sequence SS and Frequency Hopping SS. A DSSS system is intrinsically a wideband system. Therefore, for a given processing gain (PG), the filter will have a bandwidth equal to PG times the modulated bandwidth. An FHSS system, though wideband on the average, is narrowband when a single time slot is considered. Therefore, robustness to interferers and fading is guaranteed by its on-the-average wideband behavior, while selectivity and low noise is assured by its instantaneous narrow-band behavior, allowing narrowband channel filtering. Furthermore, an FHSS system can trade-off transmitted power for hopping speed, which gives another degree of freedom on reducing the overall power consumption.

The transmitter architecture is also very important in order to optimize the overall system. The chosen modulation scheme allows a very simple way to transmit the wanted data, viz. by direct modulation of a high-frequency VCO. In this way no up-conversion stage is required. Moreover if we combine the oscillator with the PA it is possible to have a system which nearly uses all its power to transmit the data and only very little power for data processing. The schematic diagram and IC photo of such a system is shown in Fig. 5. More details can be found in [5], [6].

5.2 FE-Driven Cross-Layer Design

Transmission need not always be done in a continuous way. If done duty cycled, we have the option to power down the transceiver, which helps to reduce the averaged power dissipated per bit transferred, especially for the receiver. We can use transmission schemes that allow transmission-signal-level duty cycling, like impulse radio, where a receiver can be powered down when no impulse is sent, or data-level duty cycling, where the transceiver is powered down when no data is sent. With data-level duty cycling we further can reduce power by increasing the data rate, so as to decrease the data-burst transfer time and thus the power-on time. Of course, for the receiver blocks where power dissipation is proportional to the data rate, this will not help, but for many receiver blocks it does (like e.g. PLLs), making this option very valuable from an AFE-centric approach. A further improvement might be obtained by letting the transceiver be waken up by a separate ‘wake up radio’ that is optimized for this function only, instead of leaving this to the transceiver. However, that also entangles the PHY layer design with the MAC/Network layer (Fig. 3), as the power dissipation is strongly dependent on protocol issues like preambles, and pilot tones. By using all these options, energies/bits in the order of 10 nJ/bit can be achieved. In [7] this is further elaborated. Figure 6 shows a wake-up radio in parallel to a 60 GHz (beamsteering) receiver.
5.3 Electronic Beamsteering FE

Electronic beamsteering is another option to combat the AFE’s bottleneck. Spatial selectivity, provided by the beamsteering, provides higher SNR and decreased interferer level, thus alleviating the problem for the AFE considerably, but at the same time it requires extra hardware in the AFE: parallel paths, phase shifters, and control [24]. As this option requires an optimal antenna-FE design and a smart FE that can autonomously perform self-steering, it will be further addressed in Sect. 7.2.

6. Programmable FEs

Besides trying to optimize the capacity and to exploit this maximally, we can tackle the margin problem to enhance the effective data capacity, and at the same time optimize the effective use of it. As a first step we discuss in this section programmable FEs that can be adapted by the user to changing conditions. In further sections we will address smart FEs.

In the research addressed in this section, the channel is made programmable to make it suitable for a lot of standards. The main problem is the wide frequency band (with its associated problems like power, linearity and interference) covered in total by the various standards, see Fig. 7. A straightforward option is to convert the whole frequency band and also the full signal range covered by the standards and do all transmission functionality in the digital baseband; this leads to a lot of noise (so decreased capacity in the analog part), to non-optimal use of the capacity (non-optimal signal conditioning), and to large margins (to cover all linearity and interference problems that come along with such a wideband approach); it is thus in all aspects very inefficient in power dissipation and area. Alternatively, we can split into parallel channels, each optimized, and switch on only the one used (or multiple channels, in case of concurrent operation). This costs a lot of area. Making the analog functions programmable, as a function of the actual situation, seems a more reasonable solution. Adjusting the analog building blocks can be done in design, performance, and parameter space [8], [9]. Especially for high speed analog circuits, this is difficult without introducing extra impairments and extra costs.

Here we have chosen to combine these options, and to do the programming gradually at the various parts of the AFE, in such a way that the channel adaptation is optimally distributed over the chain inside the AFE, see Fig. 8 [10], [11]. First, the frequency selectivity is distributed over three stages: we split the full wideband that covers all the standards to be received in sub bands, each still wide, but nevertheless narrower then the original band, see Fig. 7. The three paths respectively treat the GSM and DCS/PCS bands; the WLAN-b/g and Bluetooth bands; and the WLAN-a bands and the IEEE 802.16 bands. The assumption made here is the presence of RF selective filters in front of the LNA for relaxing the linearity requirements of the front-end.

The LNA circuit is shown in Fig. 9; the bond inductor is used to compensate parasitics and to match the sub-wideband. As no narrow-band selectivity is chosen, we can do without the area-consuming inductors. Next, we provide some further selectivity with the discrete time signal processing block (Fig. 8) that provides a tunable bandpass filter with poly-phase filters and mixers, for multi-mode and
multi-band receiver IF selectivity [11]. A PLL suppressed the noise of the RC oscillator, to fulfill the required timing selectivity requirement. The selectivity steps are meant to optimize in terms of Shannon capacity: to decrease the margins, by suppressing the interferers, and to optimize the capacity by reducing the noise. Next, we do the conversion. Final channel selectivity is left for the digital baseband processor. Besides selectivity programming, we need signal range programming. This is done in only two steps: first in the LNA, see Fig. 9; next in the digital baseband processor.

7. Smart Antenna-FE Combinations

A further optimization of the effective data capacity is achieved by making the FE smart. Two examples of smart antenna-frontend combinations will be given in this section. One addresses smart autonomous adaptation of a FE to fluctuating antenna-FE mismatch. The other example addresses the use of smart beamforming.

7.1 Smart Antenna-FE Matching

Link quality of cellular phones suffers from antenna mismatch caused by the narrow bandwidth of miniaturized high-Q antennas and by detuning of the antenna resonance frequency [12] due to fluctuating antenna-user interaction and changes in phone form-factor. Mismatch of the antenna impedance results in reduced maximum field strength and deteriorates modulation quality [13], receiver sensitivity and power amplifier efficiency. Adaptive antenna matching techniques [14]–[18] are being explored that automatically compensate mismatch. Such smart RF front-ends are attractive because they dynamically optimize the signal conditions at the interface between transmission channel and analogue front-end [1], by minimizing reflection losses. Capacitive RF-MEMS switches [19]–[22] are used as tunable matching elements to meet the very demanding requirements on linearity, insertion loss, and tuning range.

Antenna-user interaction causes mainly a down shift in the series resonance frequency of planar inverted-F antennas (PIFA) that are often used in mobile phones. We apply a tunable series-LC network, depicted in Fig. 10, for impedance correction because it is the simplest network that effectively compensates the resulting inductive antenna behavior. The adaptive tuning system comprises a tunable 5-bit switched capacitor array, high-voltage MEMS biasing switches, a high-voltage generator, a phase detector, and an up/down counter.

Mismatch information is derived from the phase of the matched impedance \( \phi_{Z_{\text{DET}}} \) at the network input, which is given by the phase difference between the input signals \( u \) and \( i \). Both signals are hard limited and applied to a mixer to obtain the phase \( \phi_{Z_{\text{DET}}} \) [23]. Depending on the sign of the detected phase, the counter output, and hence the switched capacitor array, will either be increased or decreased in steps of 1 LSB (least significant bit). Consequently, the loop controls the phase of the detected impedance \( \phi_{Z_{\text{DET}}} \) to zero, step by step, keeping phase transients of the transmitted signal small. The photograph in Fig. 11 shows the adaptive antenna matching module that consists of a Si-capped RF-MEMS array, a detector, and a high voltage generator die mounted on laminate.

The variable capacitor is realized as a 5-bit binary weighted switched capacitor array as depicted in Fig. 12. Each bit is activated via a bias control line \( b_i \). The resistors \( R \) provide RF-isolation and have high impedances to minimize insertion loss.

Hardware evaluation proves the module to meet all
GSM/EDGE/WCDMA linearity requirements. Adaptive control of the complete module, connected to a planar inverted-F antenna (PIFA), has been verified. When a hand is moved towards the PIFA, the module input impedance remains close to the center of the Smith chart in closed loop condition, whereas the impedance shifts away in open loop condition, as depicted in Fig. 13. For extreme hand-effects the maximum correction is $-75\,\text{j}\Omega$. Hence, the module corrects antenna impedance disturbances as expected.

7.2 Smart Beamforming

As discussed already shortly in Sect. 5, beamsteering is a very effective way to provide extra selectivity (in the spatial domain, thus providing antenna gain) and decrease of interferers (so high signal gain and selectivity). If the zeros in the antenna radiation pattern are put in the direction of the interferers, a high suppression of them can be achieved. However, this requires both electrically programmable beams and a smart control. Here, we will limit us to our research on electrically-controlled beamforming with the use of a phased antenna array, in the context of transmission at high frequencies (60 GHz), where the antenna dimensions, and the distances between the antennas in the array, can be kept small. Figure 6 already showed a beamsteering receiver (in conjunction with the wake up radio that was discussed), and in [24] several phase shift architecture options, and a series-tuned phase shifter are discussed. In [25] a 4-bit controlled varactor-loaded differential transmission-line phase shifter is described, implemented in 65 nm CMOS, to achieve a phase resolution of $22.5^\circ$.

Figure 14 shows the circuit diagram. Each varactor is controlled by just one bit, placing the varactor at one of the two insensitive ends of its voltage range. The differential operation of the varactor keeps the well at virtual earth, making it quite insensitive to parasitics. The 7-bits thermometer-code control for the seven stages is decoded from the 3 LSB PCM bits. The MSB PCM bit controls a swap, thus providing a corresponding $180^\circ$ phase shift. The whole phase shifter, see Fig. 15, occupies only $0.2\,\text{mm}^2$.

8. Smart and Flexible Data Converters

For the data converters, too, it holds that smartness can decrease the margins and increase the ratio between effective data capacity and power dissipation (Fig. 1). In [2], [3] it is described how smartness can be applied in various ways, both to combat various problems like interferences and technology spread and dependence, and to optimally adapt to and cooperate with the rest of the chain, system, user and environment. The margin can also be reduced by adapting the conversion (and the whole system) to the application, which requires flexibility. In this section we will first address examples of smart and flexible DA converters, and next give an example of a flexible AD converter.

8.1 Smart and Flexible DA Converters

A first approach to smartness, to improve the performance in a DAC, is to calibrate the individual current sources, on-chip, and autonomously. The conventional way, and also our first step, is to do that for the unary currents in a segmented converter [26], leaving the binary currents uncalibrated, and hence leaving the converter partly dependent on architecture (choice of segmentation) and technology. A better approach is to include the binary currents in the calibration.
A methodology for calibrating binary currents is proposed in [28]. The basic idea is that two (or more) sets of binary currents are available, by just copying the binary set, or by splitting each individual binary current source in two.

In [28]–[30] both the algorithm and a fully integrated DAC, with self-calibrating unary and binary current sources, are presented (Fig. 16). Four individual DACs are preceded on-chip by a programmable digital preprocessing block that provides smartness and flexibility: depending on a chosen mode of operation (op-mode) it redistributes the input digital word \( w(nT) \) among the sub-conversion branches. The four DACs on the chip together can e.g. be seen as one DAC with an unconventional segmentation (four main segments, each of them unary/binary segmented), which provides flexibility and redundancy in current-source combinations. This has been exploited to achieve both unary and binary calibration, making the (static) performance of the DAC completely independent of architecture and technology.

The flexibility and redundancy in this DAC architecture can also be exploited by finding, via on-chip measurement facilities, from all redundant combinations the best sets of combinations (‘optimal mapping of codes to current sources’), such as to minimize e.g. the INL (static performance) or SFDR (dynamic performance), see [30]. In earlier work [31] we introduced a mapping technique that, applied to a set of thermometer current sources, showed an improvement in SFDR of about 30 dB for a linear distribution of errors, and 20–25 dB for a random one. Again another option is to randomize the combinations (‘shuffling’), thus randomizing the errors, which minimizes the distortion components.

Finally, the flexibility can be exploited to achieve flexibility at application level (like user programmable choice of the number of DA conversion functions, the resolution, and the power dissipation), which facilitates the use of this DAC on programmable chips, like multistandard/multimode chips or even FPGAs.

8.2 Smart and Flexible AD Converters

An example of a flexible AD converter is given in [32]–[34]. This converter is built up in an ‘FPGA-like’ way, see the chip photomicrograph in Fig. 17, with basic modules (residue stages) that can be combined in various ways, so as to provide the structure of choice, like pipeline, time-interleaved or cyclic structure; to parallelize units to optimize the signal to noise ratio; or to minimize the power dissipation for a given speed. Also, several independent ADs can be configured in parallel. This makes this approach such flexible that it can be used as a component in programmable chips, like the general purpose FPGAs.

9. Smart Pre and Post Correction

Margin reduction, and thus improvement of effective data capacity (Fig. 1), can also be achieved by compensation of distortion errors by means of pre and post processing.

9.1 Smart Digitally-Assisted Analog Pre-Correction

In [35], [36] a method for the on-chip measurement and analog correction of gain errors, offsets and non-linearities of the T&H circuit of an ADC was presented. The T/H was made programmable in the analog domain and digitally assisted, to correct for (matching) errors in e.g. an interleaved AD converter, see Fig. 18. The method does not require an accurate reference source nor an accurate measurement device.

9.2 Smart Digital Post Correction

Digital post correction at baseband, e.g. for AD converters is well known and widely used. An example of post correction of the aforementioned T&H in the digital domain is given in [37]. A further integration of post correction with the chain, especially with the IF or RF part of it, is less straightforward.
A prerequisite then is a proper estimation and a modeling of the impairments at RF/IF level to their influence at baseband where it is to be corrected. In [38] this baseband modeling is done for I/Q imbalance, DC offset and non-linearities in the IF part between mixer and AD converter. Conventional distortion metrics, like 1 dB-compression point and IP3, are not suited for this purpose. Instead, a bounded Taylor series is used to describe the signal, and all potential distortion products (limited by the bound on the Taylor series), with assumed independent phases, are taken into account and translated to a parameter matrix in a baseband model description. The parameters, describing the amplitudes of the individual distortion components, can be estimated during pilot tones that are sent out in preambles, and used to correct the linearity of the system by means of an inverse non-linear characteristic in a post-processing block. The final parameter values can also be mapped back, finally, to the conventional parameters, to ease their interpretation.

10. Conclusions

Future transmission chains require an integral multi-disciplinary chain optimization, both over the hardware chain and across various OSI layers. A high-level Shannon view in combination with trends reveals that the analog front-end will become a severe bottleneck, and that this asks for a new FE-centric view on the partitioning and on the client-server relations in the overall chain. Antenna, analog FE and converters should be seen as one function: optimal translation of the incoming signals into relevant bits, and vice versa. A smart-FE approach is required to fight the increase in margins and thus to increase the effective data capacity of the channel, and to optimize the utilization of this data capacity. Several examples have been shown to concretize it.

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Arthur H.M. van Roermund was born in Delft, The Netherlands in 1951. He received the M.Sc. degree in electrical engineering in 1975 from the Delft University of Technology and the Ph.D. degree in Applied Sciences from the K.U. Leuven, Belgium, in 1987. From 1975 to 1992 he was with Philips Research Laboratories in Eindhoven. From 1992 to 1999 he has been a full professor at the Electrical Engineering Department of Delft University of Technology, where he was chairman of the Electronics Research Group and member of the management team of DlMES. From 1992 to 1999 he has been chairman of a two-years post-graduate school for “chartered designer.” From 1992 to 1997 he has been consultant for Philips. October 1999 he joined Eindhoven University of Technology as a full professor, chairing the Mixed-signal Microelectronics Group. Since September 2002 he is also director of research of the Department of Electrical Engineering. He is chairman of the board of ProRISC, a nation-wide microelectronics platform; a member of the ICT research platform for the Netherlands (IPN); and a member of the supervisory board of the NRC Photonics research centre. Since 1995, he is senior member of the IEEE. Since 2001, he is one of the three organisers of the yearly workshop on Advanced Analog Circuit Design (AACD). He authored/co-authored around 300 articles, and 16 books. In 2004 he achieved the ‘Simon Stevin Meester’ award, couple to a price of 500.000€, for his scientific and technological achievements.

Peter Baltus was born in Sittard, The Netherlands, in 1960. He received his M.Sc. degree from Eindhoven University of Technology in 1985, and his Ph.D. degree from the same university in 2004. He has worked for Philips and NXP Semiconductors on various topics, including analog-to-digital converter design, microcontroller architecture and design, software, and RF circuits and systems, in various positions including scientist, cluster leader, development lab manager, program manager, fellow and chief architect at various locations, including Eindhoven (The Netherlands), Sunnyvale (USA) and Caen (France). He joined Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) in 2007 as a professor in high frequency communication electronics and director of the Centre for Wireless Technology, Eindhoven (CWTech). He (co-)authored over 30 papers and 15 patents.

André van Bezooijen received the B.S. degree in Electrical Engineering from Breda Technical University, The Netherlands, in 1984. Currently, he is working towards a Ph.D. degree on adaptive RF front-ends. Since 1998 he has been a Senior Engineer with Philips Semiconductors Nijmegen, The Netherlands, where, in the role of Project Leader, he is engaged in concept development of power amplifier and front-end modules for cellular phone applications. In 2006, the organization became part of NXP Semiconductors. He was involved in analogue and mixed-signal integrated circuit design at Philips Research, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, from 1984 to 1993. From 1993 to 1998, he was with Philips Semiconductors System Laboratories, Eindhoven where he worked on RF IC design and digital zero-IF receiver concepts. Since July 2008 he is, as RF System Architect, with EPCOS working on tunable RF front-ends. He is author or co-author of several papers and holds a dozen of patents.
Johannes A. (Hans) Hegt was born on June 30, 1952 in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. After finishing the education in Electrical Engineering at the Technical College in ’s Hertogenbosch, he studied Electrical Engineering at the Eindhoven University of Technology, where he graduated with honours in 1982. From 1983 until 1986 he was an assistant at the TUE. Since 1987, he is a lecturer at this University, where he gives courses in the areas of switched-capacitor filter engineering, switched current filters, digital electronics, microprocessors, digital signal processing, and neural networks. In 1988 he received a Ph.D. degree on synthesis of switched-capacitor filters. Since 1994 he is an Associate Professor on mixed analogue/digital circuit design. He is currently involved in the realisation of data converters.

Emanuele Lopelli was born on September 1st, 1976 in Bari, Italy. From 1996 till 2002 he studied Electrical Engineering at Politecnico di Bari, in Bari (Italy). He performed his graduation project at Ericsson “Microwave and High Speed Electronics Research Center” in M¨olndal, Sweden. The subject concerned the design of a mixed analog and digital control circuit for a multi-band VCO for Minilink application using 0.5 μm BiCMOS technology. In November 2002 he graduated (Summa cum Laude) at the Politecnico di Bari. From January 2003 till September 2003 he was employed as a Mixed-Signal research engineer at “Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique” (CNRS) in Strasbourg (France). During this period he worked in the development of the read-out electronics for Minimum Ionising Particle MOS Active Pixel Sensor (MAPS) in CMOS technology. In November 2003 he moved in Eindhoven (The Netherlands) to Eindhoven University of Technology, in the Mixed-Signal Microelectronics Group (MsM), where he is currently pursuing his Ph.D. degree on Ultra-Low Power Transceiver for Wireless Personal Area Network (WPAN). He is currently a staff scientist at Broadcom Corporation, Bunnik, the Netherlands. He holds three patents.

Reza Mahmoudi studied Electrical Engineering at the Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands, where he joined the Microwave Component Group and received his M.Sc. degree in 1993 with a thesis entitled “A Measurement System for Noise Parameters.” He was employed as a full member of the same group from January 1, 1993 to December 7, 1999. He earned the Designers Certificate from Delft in 1996 with a thesis entitled “A Systematic Design Method for a Feed-Forward Error Control System.” This work was the initial step leading to his Ph.D. thesis (2001). He worked for Philips Discrete Semiconductors in Nijmegen, The Netherlands, and Advanced Wave Research in El Segundo, California. Since April 2003 he has been an Assistant Professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering at Eindhoven University of Technology.

Georgi I. Radulov was born on April 23, 1978 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. He studied Electrical Engineering at the Technical University of Sofia, where he graduated with honors in 2001. From 2002 until 2004 he studied and graduated the two year post-masters program “Professional Doctorate in Engineering” of Stan Ackermans Institute at Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e). Since 2004, he is pursuing the Ph.D. degree at Mixed-Signal Microelectronics group at TU/e in the field of Digital-to-Analog Converters (DACs). At IEEE APPCAS’08, his paper “A flexible 12-bit self-calibrated quad-core current-steering DAC” was recognized with the award for “Outstanding Student Paper.” He holds two US patents on DAC current sources calibration.

Maja Vidojkovic was born in Kumanovo, Macedonia. In 1999 she graduated successfully at the Faculty of Electronic Engineering in Nis, Serbia, where she was working as a research assistant. In 2003 she received her TWAIO degree on Platform-based IC design in the Mixed-signal Microelectronics group at the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e), The Netherlands. Currently, she is working in IMEC-NL on low power receivers. Also, she is working towards her PhD at TU/e on multi-standard, multi-band reconfigurable RF receiver front-ends.

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