# Digitizing and Modernizing a HP141 Display


**Prepared by:**

Bonga Njamela[1]

**Prepared for:**

Dr Stephen Paine

Department of Electrical Engineering

University of Cape Town


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# Declaration

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# Acknowledgements

When you ask God for a gift, be thankful if he sends not diamonds, pearls, or riches but the love of real, true friends.

—*Muhammad Ali*

To my supervisor, Dr Stephen Paine, thank you for pushing me to reach my full potential and completing this research project. I am truly grateful for showing me what it means to be a good engineer.

To Michael Inggs, thank you for providing the necessary information for starting the project. The technical data, notes and videos that you sent to me at the beginning of the project were a lamp on the path to completing the project.

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To the Almighty God and my mother, thank you for applying the patience that was required to mould me into the person that I am today.

# Abstract

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# Abbreviations

**ADC** - **A**nalog-to-**D**igital **C**onverter
**AvM** - **A**verage **M**ode
**CRT** - **C**athode **R**ay **T**ube
**HP** - **H**ewlett-**P**ackard
**IF** - **I**ntermediate **F**requency
**LCD** - **L**iquid **D**isplay
**PHM** - **P**eak **H**old **M**ode
**RF** - **R**adio **F**requency
**SA** - **S**ignal/**S**pectrum **A**nalyzer

# Chapter 1

# Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Designed and patented in the 1970s, Hewlett-Packard's (HP) high performance plug-in model 8552B and 8555A spectrum analyzers (SA), equipped with the 141T display, remain powerful tools for characterising signals in the frequency domain. The 8552B is particularly convenient for measuring spectra in a wide frequency range between 20 Hz to 40 GHz. Another advantage of these spectrum analysers is that a user can broaden frequency requirements by increasing the number of tuning sections. Additionally, the 141T features absolute calibration of amplitude as well as high resolution, sensitivity and a simple display output.

The shortcoming of the spectrum analyzer, however, is that it uses a cathode ray tube (CRT) display which is prone to degradation after extended periods of usage and is outdated compared to the display on most modern devices. In this project, a single board computer and a liquid crystal display (LCD) touch screen is interfaced with the 141T display unit, thereby, replacing the outdated CRT technology. This allows users to continue to exploit the advantageous capabilities of the spectrum analyzer, such as the wide frequency bandwidth, despite damage to the CRT display. In addition, interfacing a single board computer with the 141T offers improved software-based features for performing frequency analysis.

Specifically, this project aims to develop a new display for the high resolution 8552B intermediate frequency (IF) section equipped with the 8555A spectrum analyzer RF section which can make frequency domain measurements from 10 MHz to 18 GHz. The broad scanning frequency bandwidth of this model makes it suitable for spectrum surveillance, RF and EMC field strength analysis with a calibrated antenna [1].

The CRT display subsystem consists of a post-accelerator storage tube with a 9 kV accelerating potential and aluminized P31 phosphor for producing high trace brightness. When calibrated, the CRT screen can display frequency bandwidths of up to 2 GHz wide. To display the full frequency range with a maximum of 18 GHz, the CRT can be calibrated in 10 frequency bands using internal mixing. One of advantage of the 141T over other displays that were manufactured during that time is that more detail can be observed in the spectrum by progressively narrowing frequency width from 100 Hz/division to 2 kHz/division. Overall, the 141T consists of a CRT graticule which can plot the frequency domain representation of a signal on a 2D plane with 8 x 10 divisions.

For this project, the 141T is powered by a 220 V single-phase source at 60 Hz, requiring less than

225 W even when plug-ins are connected. To achieve the 9 kV accelerating potential for deflecting electron beams in producing the CRT display, the device uses a step-up transformer and transistorized oscillator. The main disadvantage of having to increase the accelerating potential in a CRT display system is that the performance of electronic voltage regulation components such as capacitors, diodes and resistors can degrade over time.

Another challenge of using a phosphor CRT display is the effect of persistence on the saccadic information transfer which can lead to bias in experimental results [2]. This effect of persistence on experimental results is of particular interest to frequency domain analysis since displayed signals include noise from the environment which can make it difficult to extract accurate frequency information from plots. For the Model 141T, the persistence varies from the natural persistence of P31 phosphor (0.1 s) to a maximum of 15 s when the device is operating in the maximum writing rate mode. Therefore, phosphor persistence in the CRT display can significantly affect the amount of time to acquire measurements as well as the precision of the data extracted from the display.

## 1.2 Objectives

The aim of this project is to design a new display with full functionality and computer-aided signal processing features such as signal normalization. The digital display has to be compatible with the voltage outputs that enable analog signals to be plotted by the 141T. The aim of digitizing the signals is to interface measures from the spectrum analyzer with a computer that can perform tasks and store data accordingly. Therefore, a survey of the 8555A RF section and 8552B IF section outputs and available single board computer and touch screen options must be conducted. Furthermore, the project aims to investigate basic XYZ replicas, performing digital signal processing algorithms, how to correctly display signal data on annotated axes depending on available instrument settings.

This report aims to provide:

- Characterization of the HP141 display inputs from the 8555A RF section and 8552B IF section
- Available options for single-board computer and touchscreens options and the most suitable selection for interfacing with the two spectrum analyzer sections
- A design and simulation of interface between the single-board computer which includes analog converter for digitizing outputs from the RF and IF sections
- Algorithms for processing the digital signals and performing operations on displayed spectra
- Results on the construction, unit tests and integration tests of the improved system for spectral analysis

## 1.3 Project Requirements

Before detailing system requirements, user requirements were used to scope the project in terms of objectives that are not related to functions and performance. In designing the upgraded or ‘new’ SA, selection of hardware components was conducted with the aim of formulating specifications that successfully fulfill user requirements. Table 1.1 summarises the user requirements and gives a short description of the objective.

Table 1.1: User requirements.

| ID | Requirement Description |
|---|---|
| UR-01 | Display of the new SA must behave like the display of newer generations of signal analyzers, such as the Field Fox. That is, the new SA must achieve more or less the same number data points as the Field Fox (801 points). |
| UR-02 | SA must have the following display modes:<br>(a) Peak hold mode (PHM) which displays the largest value seen and updated at each scan.<br>(b) Average mode (AvM) in which each frequency bin's average is updated at each scan.<br>(c) Raw mode (RwM) where the latest value is displayed until the next scan and overwriting each value during a scan event. |
| UR-03 | SA unit must have a suitable vertical resolution based on a 10 dB/division in the logarithmic scale. |
| UR-04 | Linear display mode must have low priority. |
| UR-05 | SA display subsystem must have setting markers, similar to the Field Fox analyzer. |
| UR-06 | Design must be capable of storing and recalling traces. |
| UR-07 | Users must be able to change modes by touching the screen and must be able to enter data using a keyboard. |
| UR-08 | All software must load on power up. |
| UR-09 | SA unit must use a single wall wart power source for the display subsystem. |
| UR-10 | Project must develop an HP141T display emulator of horizontal sweep, vertical sawtooth and pen lift state. |

Table 1.2 details system requirements in terms of functions and performance. These requirements were developed after a review of the scope through the formalization of the user requirements in table 1.1 above.

Table 1.2: System requirements.

| ID | Requirement Description |
|---|---|
| SR-01 | The system must digitize analog outputs from an HP141T 8555A model which performs frequency domain measurements between 20 Hz and 18 GHz. |
| SR-02 | Digitized outputs must be interfaced with a single board computer for performing signal processing tasks. |
| SR-03 | The HP141T must interface with a LCD touchscreen display to produce a valid display. |
| SR-04 | The system must include a signal conditioning box for debugging purposes and replicating the outputs of the spectrum analyzer during testing. |
| SR-05 | The system must be simulated using software. |
| SR-06 | The display must include new annotations that take instrument and operator manual inputs into account. |
| SR-07 | The system must include appropriate documentation such as tutorials and operational instructions when using the signal processor and screen. |

In addition to the above mentioned system requirements, the project considers the basic configuration parameters that signal analyzers typically provide such as:

- Setting the minimum and maximum frequencies to be displayed based on a given center frequency
- Setting the reference amplitude for frequency responses and a span that is suitable for the spectrum analyzer
- Setting the frequency resolution according to the passband of the IF filter
- Setting the sweep time required to record the full frequency spectrum that is of interest

## 1.4 Scope & Limitations

The focus of this report is in the design and implementation of a digitized display for the HP141T that interfaces with a single board computer for storing and manipulating signal data from the oscilloscope. The scope is limited to selection of electronics that are suitable for converting the analog signals from the HP141T that are responsible for displaying signals. The scope only includes a survey of the HP141T circuits and outputs that directly affect how a spectrum is generated with respect to time domain and frequency domain analyses. The paper is not concerned with changing or improving the operational design of the device with respect to its power, amplification and filtering circuitry.

## 1.5 Report Outline

Chapter 2 initiates the report by establishing the general history and theoretical framework for the design and applications of spectrum analyzers in engineering. The same chapter details the previous techniques for converting the output of a SA to digital values that can be manipulated by a processor. Finally, designs of displays are explored in literature to establish an approach to representing the processor output on a LCD screen.

# Chapter 2

# Literature Review

The aim of this chapter is to conceptualize the operation of spectrum analyzers and establish a theoretical foundation for the frequency analysis techniques applied to produce the correct output. This conceptualization is then integrated with a broader review of digitizing and modernizing the display of spectrum analyzers.

In circumventing design limitations of spectrum analyzer displays, it is prudent to survey the most suitable hardware components. This is particularly true for the case where electronic components are required to perform in a broad frequency bandwidth. For example, for high frequency signals, the Nyquist theorem indicates that the ADC is required to have a sample at a frequency that is more than double the frequency of the output signal. Furthermore, the challenge of presenting signals in the frequency domain using electronics exists due to the fact the input signal to the ADC holds information about frequency in the time domain. Therefore, the investigation of literature that is presented in this chapter aims to provide a motivation for the design decisions taken in digitizing and modernizing the HP141T display.

The chapter begins with an evaluation of the frequency domain analysis theory that is applied in the operation of signal analyzers. Then, the different principles that distinguish different types of analyzers are explored to form the basis understanding the expected behaviour of a spectrum analyzer with specific settings. Following descriptions of the operation of spectrum analyzers from literature, the chapter includes a review of the investigation into different techniques for digitizing analyzer displays. This also includes a review of the different electronic components and techniques for digitizing frequency information in order to survey available hardware options that can be selected for a cost effective implementation. Finally, a broad discussion is included on different types of displays for analyzers in literature and a critique of the literature is provided to outline the purpose of the proposed design.

## 2.1 Overview of Frequency Domain Analysis in Spectrum Analyzer Designs

### 2.1.1 Frequency Domain Analysis of Signals

### 2.1.2 Principles of Spectrum Analyzers

## 2.2 Digitizing Spectrum Analyzer Outputs

### 2.2.1 Output Voltage Regulation and Preparation for Frequency Analysis

### 2.2.2 Transforming Spectrum Analyzer Output Signals to Digital Frequency Domain

### 2.2.3 Interfacing Computers with Spectrum Analyzers

## 2.3 Modern Spectrum Analyzer Displays

### 2.3.1 Configurations and Displayed Data in Modern Spectrum Analyzer Displays

### 2.3.2 Technological Developments in Signal Analyzer Displays

# Chapter 3

# Methodology

## 3.1 System Overview

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## 3.2 Design Implementation

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## 3.3 System Requirements

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## 3.4 Scope & Limitations

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# Chapter 4

# Results

## 4.1 Background

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# Chapter 5

# Discussion

## 5.1 Background

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## 5.4 Scope & Limitations

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## 5.5 Report Outline

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# Chapter 6

# Conclusions

> The same rule holds for us now, of course: we choose our next world through what we learn in this one. Learn nothing, and the next world is the same as this one.
>
> —*Richard Bach, Jonathan Livingston Seagull*

The purpose of this project was to...

This report began with...

The literature review was followed in Chapter...

The bulk of the work for this project followed next, in Chapter...

In Chapter...

Finally, Chapter... attempted to...

In summary, the project achieved the goals that were set out, by designing and demonstrating...

# Chapter 7

# Recommendations

> It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced.
>
> —*Abraham Lincoln*

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