

A thermo-optical plane source method to measure thermal conductivity

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ABSTRACT

We demonstrate a Thermo-Optical Plane Source (TOPS) technique to measure the thermal conductivity of materials. This high-throughput method measures the thermal conductivity of materials with minimal sample preparation and limited restrictions on sample shape and geometry. Moreover, the technique is applied to solids, liquids, gels, and pastes with no change in implementation. The TOPS technique uses laser heating to induce a steady-state temperature rise in a material and infrared thermography to measure the corresponding temperature rise. Fourier's law is applied to directly measure thermal conductivity, rather than thermal diffusivity or effusivity, eliminating the need for prior knowledge of density and specific heat. We demonstrate the ability to measure thermal conductivities ranging from 0.03 to 60 W m⁻¹ K⁻¹ at room temperature.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The thermal conductivity (κ) of materials plays a critical role in the design, development, and performance of a wide array of technologies and applications. For example, the efficiency of insulating foams and porous materials for thermal isolation in applications ranging from wearables to building materials is directly tied to their inability to conduct heat.^{1–5} Accurate and high-throughput measurement of these low thermal conductivity materials is an outstanding challenge in this community, where a century old technique, the guarded hot plate method, remains the standard for direct (steady-state) measurements of κ ,⁶ despite a bulky experiment, onerous sample requirements, and measurement times on the order of hours. Another major industry that requires accurate measurements of κ is solid-state energy conversion technologies such as thermoelectric devices,^{7–9} where maintaining a large temperature gradient across materials is paramount and, as such, accurate knowledge of κ for these materials on operational length scales is necessary to evaluate the device performance via the thermoelectric device figure of merit.⁹ On the other end of the spectrum, the higher thermal

conductivities of ceramics, metals, semiconductors, and their composites are a crucial parameter dictating the efficiency of nearly all modern electronic devices,^{10–12} quantifying their ability to dissipate heat generated during operation.

Across a myriad of industries underlying modern technology, accurate measurement of κ can be of utmost importance. The ideal tool for such characterization should be simple to use, relevant to an array of material types, high-throughput, accurate, and repeatable. That is, the ideal technique is capable of measuring κ no matter its value (both low and high extremes), measures various material types and phases (solid, liquid, gels, pastes, gases, powders, etc.) without any change in approach, is nondestructive, is localized to identify differences in thermal properties rather than an aggregate property, is unaffected by sample size or geometry, is unaffected by sample nonidealities such as surface roughness or scratches, and requires little to no sample preparation for measurement. Furthermore, the ideal technique should require minimal assumptions and inputs about the sample; this inherently requires a direct measurement of thermal conductivity rather than a measurement of thermal diffusivity and/or effusivity.

Surveying the field of modern thermal property measurement techniques, although no technique fits this description, significant progress has been made toward this goal. Electrical approaches such as the 3ω technique^{13,14} are able to perform local measurements on a sample from its surface using patterned heaters and thermometers. However, the need to fabricate heaters on the surface presents a high barrier to entry for the technique and significantly limits the types of materials that can be studied. The transient plane source method¹⁵ in its original form suffers from the same limitation regarding patterning, but the hot disk method¹⁶ overcomes this by patterning the metal heater into a polymer layer, which is then sandwiched between two identical samples to be measured. While an improvement in accessibility, it is obviously not ideal to require the fabrication of two identical samples. Moreover, this technique requires specific sample geometries and is an aggregate measurement of thermal diffusivity, not a direct measurement of κ . Furthermore, the contact nature of all electrical techniques is not ideal for many use cases involving *in situ* or quality control testing. While additional testing methods have been validated using the principles of the transient plane source method, allowing for measurements of higher thermal conductivity materials and thin materials and making use of single-sided measurements, they are largely constrained to very specific sample geometries and material property ranges.

Various optical thermometry platforms offer a non-contact alternative and have proven to be viable approaches to measure κ under appropriate operating procedures. Since its inception in the 1960s, Laser Flash Analysis (LFA) has been a ubiquitously utilized method to measure the thermal diffusivity of solids.¹⁷ Traditional implementation of LFA requires a standardized sample geometry and optical access to both the front and back of the specimen for heating and temperature sensing, respectively. In addition, as a dual-sided transient thermometry technique, determining the thermal conductivity requires knowledge of a material's specific heat and density. The advent of laser-based pump-probe thermoreflectance techniques in the 1980s gave rise to new directions for thermal conductivity measurements with much better spatial resolution than laser flash, offering the ability to measure the thermal conductivity of thin films and the thermal conductance across interfaces that were previously inaccessible with LFA.^{18–20} In 2004, a short-pulsed thermoreflectance method, time-domain thermoreflectance (TDTR), became standardized.²¹ This localized measurement uses a focused laser beam rather than a surface flash, giving it superior resolution both spatially and temporally to LFA.²² A similar technique, frequency-domain thermoreflectance (FDTR), simplified the experimental equipment needed by relying on continuous wave lasers to pump and probe a sample.²³ Still, both TDTR and FDTR are transient measurements such that thermal diffusivity or effusivity is fundamentally being measured. More recently, steady-state thermoreflectance (SSTR) was developed, allowing for direct measurement of thermal conductivity with a simple experimental setup.²⁴ Although thermoreflectance techniques are powerful and are unparalleled for thin film measurements,^{25–27} they are not ideal as a general use tool due to their requirements of a mirror finish surface, the necessity of a metal film opto-thermal transducer (requiring an additional tool for deposition), their inability to measure thermal insulators such as foams, and their inability to measure different material phases without significant modification to the experiment.

An alternative approach to thermoreflectance is the use of infrared (IR) thermometry or thermography. Generally referred to as modulated photothermal radiometry (MPTR),^{28,29} various forms of operation exist, but all operate under the same premise: modulate the power of a laser to periodically heat the sample and measure the phase and/or magnitude of the surface temperature response.³⁰ MPTR generally uses a point source measurement of temperature via directing infrared radiation from the area heated by the laser into a detector via a focusing lens or parabolic mirror. A lock-in amplifier is used to capture the temperature phase and/or magnitude at a specific modulation frequency of the pump, and the modulation frequency is varied over a wide range. A thermal model is then used to determine thermal diffusivity by fitting the model to experimental data.³¹ This approach is similar to FDTR but uses a passive IR thermometer as the probe rather than a second laser. An extension of MPTR to thermography³² is often referred to as (laser spot) lock-in thermography^{33–35} or spatially resolved photothermal radiometry.³⁶ In this technique, a modulated laser is focused onto an opaque sample, and a lock-in IR camera captures a thermal image of the surface temperature response, including phase and/or magnitude, at either the front or back of a sample at a specific modulation frequency.³⁷ The laser is generally considered a point source, and the data analysis is based on fitting the relationship between radial distance away from the center of heating and the phase or natural logarithm of the amplitude multiplied by the radial distance at a far enough distance away from the center that the laser beam shape is unimportant and the relationship between these quantities is linear.^{38,39} While losses from convection and radiation can distort this linearity, the model can be adjusted to account for these effects.⁴⁰ Thermal diffusivity is determined from these measurements, from which κ can be derived. When analysis is conducted with temperature magnitude, absolute temperature is not considered; only normalized or relative temperature is considered to avoid the need to know the optical properties of the sample. Thermography has several benefits over the point source MPTR approach, including sampling many pixels for a larger dataset, using the surface image to avoid areas that could negatively affect the measurement, and lock-in thermography, in particular, can overcome the Narcissus effect by filtering noise at all but the modulation frequency. However, a downside is that the diffraction of the infrared radiation when it passes through the lens of the recording camera can affect the readings of the surface temperature. At high frequencies, this generally increases the measured slope of phase vs radius, resulting in thermal diffusivity being overestimated.^{36,41} In addition, the spatially sampled area of the camera is typically much larger than that of a point source pyrometer, leading to lower measurement spatial resolution, typically hundreds of micrometers to millimeters rather than $<100 \mu\text{m}$ achieved in MPTR. Finally, the use of lock-in cameras may be prohibitive in cost and complexity for universal measurements.

To overcome some limitations with lock-in thermography, two alternative thermography approaches have been demonstrated. The first is based on the use of laser pulse heating and recording the resulting surface temperature profile as a function of time.⁴² Whether run in a single sided or dual sided configuration, this technique fundamentally measures thermal diffusivity but has been shown capable of measuring in-plane and cross-plane diffusivity simultaneously for semitransparent materials.⁴³ However, the use of

a pulsed laser increases the cost and complexity of the experiment. More recently, a laser-spot step-heating approach was developed to capture the transient temperature response to continuous wave laser heating.⁴⁴ In this approach, an IR camera is used to record the surface temperature response as a function of time to constant laser heating. Similar to LFA, the relationship between the temperature rise and time is used to extract thermal diffusivity. This represents an improvement in accessibility and ease of use compared to the aforementioned MPTR approaches but still suffers from the same downfalls that prohibit MPTR from being a general use tool: the sample needs to be opaque and highly emissive in the camera's operating wavelength spectrum. This highly limits the types of materials that can be measured. While coatings can be used to overcome this in some cases, it is not universal and can distort the intrinsic thermal properties measured. Moreover, comparing these techniques to lock-in thermography reveals perhaps their biggest limitation: these techniques rely on comparing temperature images (thermograms) frame-to-frame to get a temporal relationship. For entry level infrared cameras, whose accuracy is $\pm 2^\circ\text{C}$, accurate and repeatable data are difficult to obtain. Finally, both of these approaches have largely been limited to measuring the thermal diffusivity of thermal insulators, suggesting their inability to be used as a general purpose technique encompassing a full range of thermal conductivities.

Taken together, we observe the pros and cons of these approaches in order to develop a technique that combines the best of all worlds to get us closer to the ideal κ measurement technique. To this end, we introduce a new technique, Thermo-Optical Plane Source (TOPS), that draws inspiration from both thermoreflectance and infrared thermography techniques. TOPS uses a continuous wave laser to heat a local region of a sample to a steady-state temperature and an entry-level IR camera (without lock-in amplification) to measure the average temperature in the heated region as a function of laser power, the relationship to which Fourier's law is applied to determine thermal conductivity. It is well acknowledged in both the thermoreflectance community and the MPTR community that in order to accurately determine thermal conductivity, one needs to know a material's absorption at the laser wavelength and absolute temperature rise.^{24,45} To overcome this limitation, we

utilize concepts from the thermoreflectance community, specifically SSTR, by incorporating a transducer to allow direct comparison of measurements sample-to-sample via the use of calibration to establish a combined coefficient of emissivity and absorption. Unlike in thermoreflectance, where a metal film is necessary, we use a simple polymer-based film that can be applied to nearly any material, even liquids and gels/pastes. Combining the benefits of a localized and single-sided measurement, resilient to surface roughness and largely independent of sample dimension, we demonstrate a high-throughput, simple, and robust approach that is the closest yet to a universal thermal conductivity measurement technique.

II. PRINCIPLES OF OPERATION

TOPS operates on the principle of Fourier's law; a continuous heat source with known spatial intensity and power is applied to a local region of the surface of a sample to induce a steady-state temperature rise in the material. That is, the temperature gradient reaches an equilibrium between the applied heat flux and diffusion into the sample. The time it takes to reach this steady state is dependent on the non-dimensional Fourier number, $\text{Fo} = \alpha t / r_0^2$, where α is the thermal diffusivity, t is the time, and r_0 is the size of the heat source.²⁴ For a $\sim 1\text{ mm}$ diameter source used in this study, a steady-state temperature rise is achieved on the order of 0.1 seconds for high thermal diffusivity materials ($\sim 100\text{ mm}^2/\text{s}$) and on the order of 10 seconds for low thermal diffusivity materials ($\sim 1\text{ mm}^2/\text{s}$). The size of the heat source can be focused for faster measurements at the expense of the spatial resolution of temperature detection. Conversely, the diameter can be expanded for greater spatial resolution and a larger measurement volume. The steady-state temperature rise within the heated region is measured to determine the relationship $\Delta T / \Delta P$, where ΔT is the temperature rise and ΔP is the difference in power of the laser (from off to on state or from power to power if multiple powers are used). $\Delta T / \Delta P$ is then compared to a thermal model to fit the thermal conductivity of the material.

Figure 1 depicts the fundamental concepts on which the TOPS technique operates and the implementation used here. For our heat source, we use a continuous wave laser (Coherent OBIS LX FP

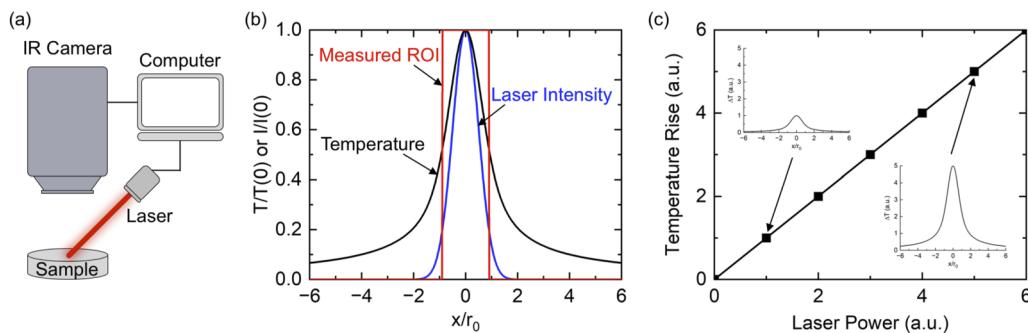


FIG. 1. Concept of the TOPS experiment. (a) Schematic of the experimental setup: a sample is heated by a collimated continuous wave laser at constant power, and the temperature rise is recorded by an infrared camera; a computer is used to automate data collection and synchronize instruments. (b) Normalized intensity of the incident laser on the sample, $I/I(0)$, and resulting temperature rise, $T/T(0)$, as a function of normalized distance from the peak of the intensity (x/r_0 , where r_0 is the $1/e^2$ radius of the laser). The temperature rise is spatially averaged within the Region of Interest (ROI). (c) The ROI steady-state temperature rise vs laser power used to heat the sample: insets show the temperature profile for a low power case and a high power case.

637 nm wavelength) with an available output power from 1 to 120 mW. After collimation, the beam diameter was measured to be 1.08 mm using a beam profiling camera (Gentec-EO Beamage-4M). For temperature measurements, we use an infrared camera (Infratec VarioCAM HDx Head S) with a 30 mm lens to achieve a spatial resolution of about 50 μm per pixel. This uncooled, microbolometer focal plane array camera, operating in the 7.5–14 μm spectral range, is an entry-level camera with no lock-in amplification capability, a relatively slow frame rate of 30 Hz, and a measurement accuracy of $\pm 2^\circ\text{C}$ at room temperature. Nonetheless, we demonstrate a method to negate any inherent noise of the camera in order to achieve accurate thermal measurements. As shown in Fig. 1(a), the laser is directed to the sample and absorbed at the sample surface. The infrared camera measures the surface temperature, and a computer is used to automate the measurement and synchronize the timing. A stage is also used to translate the height of the sample to ensure the laser focus is centered in the infrared camera image for every measurement. Figure 1(b) shows the measurement concept: a Gaussian laser beam is used for heating, resulting in a spatial temperature rise that can be determined by a thermal model.⁴⁶ We define a measurement region of interest (ROI) to spatially average the temperature within that region. The ROI chosen here was a circular region around the center with a diameter of 20 pixels, which equates to where the temperature decay reaches $\sim 50\%$ of its maximum value for a typical sample. For the ~ 1.1 mm diameter beam used here, this translates to a ~ 1 mm diameter ROI region. In principle, the choice of ROI is arbitrary, as even a single pixel provides enough information about the temperature rise, but averaging over a larger amount of pixels is preferred to offset fluctuations from noise between individual pixels and reduce the relative impact of outliers. Finally, Fig. 1(c) shows the premise of using multiple laser powers to determine the relationship between this ROI temperature rise and the laser power. With each increasing power, the temperature increases linearly (we limit all temperature rises to a few $^\circ\text{C}$ so thermal properties do not change significantly with temperature), resulting in a $\Delta T/\Delta P$ to which we can fit a thermal model.

In principle, this approach should require the need to know the sample's absorption at the laser wavelength and emissivity in the camera's spectral band. This is possible to obtain with certain materials using complementary techniques such as ellipsometry but is impractical in most cases, restricting measurement to a limited set of materials. In order to generalize this method to all materials, we apply a transducer film to the sample to ensure every measured sample has the same absorption and emissivity, so we can translate a measured $\Delta T/\Delta P$ into a true $\Delta T/\Delta P$. This is akin to common practice in other optical thermal characterization techniques such as laser flash, modulated photothermal radiometry, and thermoreflectance techniques. The transducer layer should be thin enough not to significantly influence the thermal response of the sample but thick enough to completely mask the surface optical properties of the sample. Preferably, this layer should be highly absorbing at the laser wavelength and highly emissive in the camera spectral range. Good candidates for this include thin film carbon, graphite (spray or colloidal suspension), and high emissivity paints. In our case, we use a 5 μm thick film comprised of 2 μm of PET and 3 μm of acrylic adhesive. This transducer proves to be both practical and robust for applying to nearly any type of material, and because it can be suspended over a container, it is ideal for measuring liquids

and gels/pastes. The transducer is used to determine the system proportionality constant that relates the measured data ($\Delta T/\Delta P$)_{measured}, to the true relationship ($\Delta T/\Delta P$). That is

$$\left(\frac{\Delta T}{\Delta P}\right)_{\text{measured}} \propto \frac{\epsilon\tau\Delta T}{\alpha\Delta P} = \gamma\left(\frac{\Delta T}{\Delta P}\right), \quad (1)$$

where ϵ is the transducer emissivity, τ is the transmission of infrared light to the camera (to account for any environmental losses), α is the transducer absorption, and γ is the overall system proportionality constant that can include any other system adjustments unique to a setup (e.g., laser losses from additional optical elements). To determine γ , one can independently determine all the terms that comprise it via other techniques or, more simply, use a calibration sample. In our case, we use a fused silica sample measured with a known thermal conductivity of $1.38 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$.

Once the transducer is applied, a measurement is taken. The goal is to determine the steady-state ROI temperature as a function of laser power to determine $\Delta T/\Delta P$. In practice, we record the temperature as a function of time and average the steady-state temperature over time at each set power. Prior to measurement start, a laser power array, a wait time, and an averaging time are defined. The power array defines the specific powers that will be set during a measurement, the wait time defines the measurement window over which the transient temperature rise will be ignored, and the averaging time defines the time window to average the ROI temperature when the measurement volume has reached a steady-state. When a measurement has started, an automated procedure follows:

1. At each time step, capture a thermogram from the camera.
2. Correct this thermogram in real-time to offset any background or camera drift over time (more on this below).
3. If the time is currently in an averaging window, save the corrected thermogram to a tensor.
4. At the end of the averaging period, take the average of the tensor in the time dimension to obtain an average thermogram representative of the steady-state temperature rise.
5. Extract the ROI temperature from the average thermogram.
6. Repeat steps 1–4 for each power step.
7. Determine $\Delta T/\Delta P$ based on the average ROI temperature vs power relationship.

As a note, the order of operation for data correction and extracting ROI is flexible. To save on computation, one can save the corrected ROI temperature for each time step without creating a tensor of thermograms. However, we find it beneficial to create and save the average thermogram at each power to visualize the temperature image and diagnose any potential concerns during analysis. Figure 2 shows representative measurements taken on a 3-in. diameter fused silica window and demonstrates the concept of data correction we implement for accurate measurement. In general, microbolometer focal plane array based thermal cameras such as the one used here have an absolute temperature accuracy of only $\pm 2^\circ\text{C}$ or $\pm 2\%$, whichever is greater, making them ineffective for determining accurate temperature. However, these cameras can easily have temperature resolution (the ability to distinguish temperature pixel-to-pixel) and sensitivity (responsiveness to change in temperature in time) less than 0.04°C . This makes them suitable for determining temperature differences. We exploit this principle to correct the

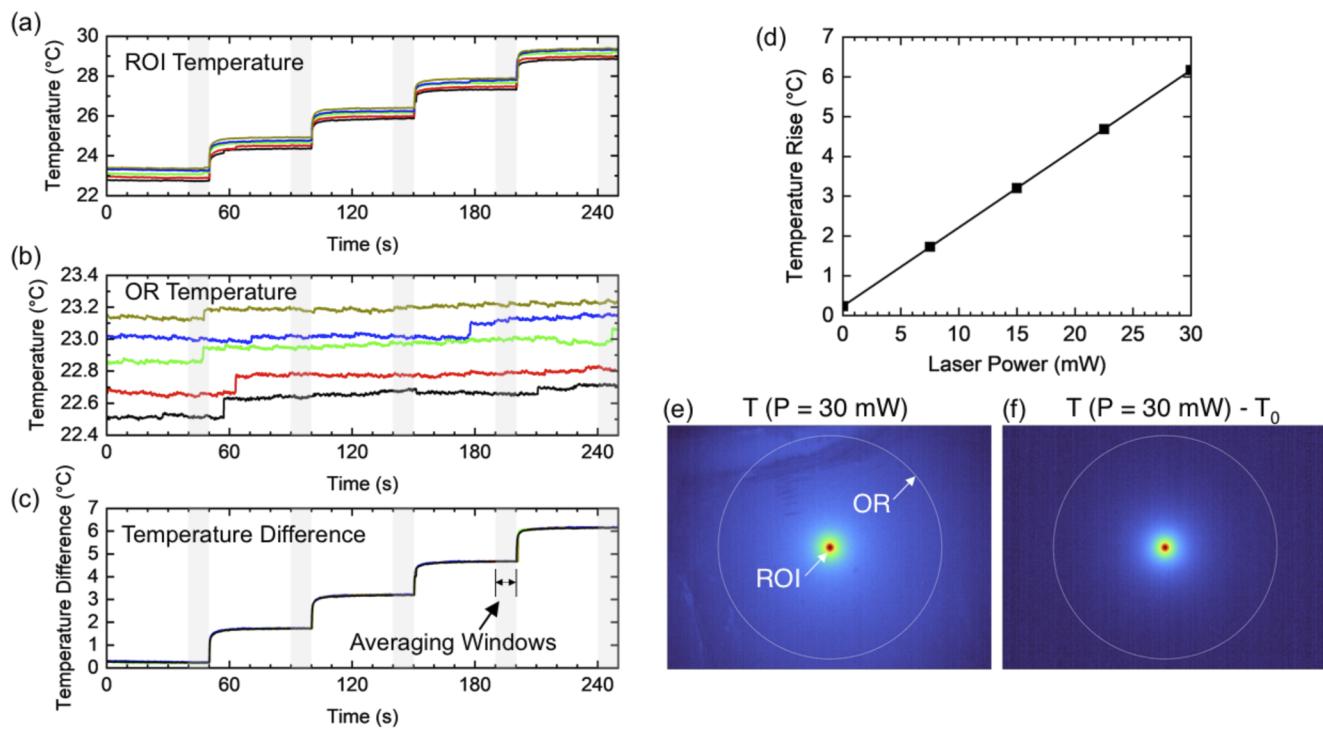


FIG. 2. Measurement data taken on a fused silica sample. (a) Raw temperature data as a function of time for the ROI region of the sample having a 20 pixel, ~ 1 mm diameter and (b) pixels on an outer ring (OR) having a 440 pixel, ~ 22 mm diameter. (c) Temperature difference defined as ROI temperature - OR temperature; this is the processed temperature rise used for analysis. When the temperature is in a steady-state, it is averaged within the defined windows shown as gray bands. (d) The average temperature rises from each averaging window as a function of laser power during that time; the data are shown in symbols, and the best fit line is overlaid. The slope is representative of the sample's thermal conductivity. (e) Thermogram of the sample surface when laser power is set to 30 mW, $T(P = 30 \text{ mW})$, and (f) differential temperature image, $T(P = 30 \text{ mW}) - T_0$, where T_0 is the temperature with no laser heating applied.

ROI temperature in real time by using the difference between the ROI temperature and an outer ring (OR) temperature that is far enough from the heated region to be representative of camera noise rather than laser heating. Figure 2(a) shows the ROI and (b) OR temperatures for five measurements as a function of time. The ROI is defined as an area with a 20 pixel (~ 1 mm) diameter, and the OR is defined as a ring of pixels corresponding to the circle with a 440 pixel (~ 22 mm) diameter. In both cases, the center is that of the peak temperature rise during laser heating, which corresponds to the center of the camera image. The noise in the data, as well as fluctuations in ambient temperature, can make it difficult to obtain consistent quantitative temperatures that can be used for measurement, as evidenced by the spread in temperature shown in Fig. 2(a) and more clearly in Fig. 2(b). Since this noise is common to both ROI and OR temperatures, subtracting the OR from the ROI temperature should offset the noise and leave us with just the temperature rise from laser heating. Figure 2(c) demonstrates that this concept works well for negating such camera noise, where all measurement data appear to converge to the same temperature difference. Moreover, this concept can be applied in real time, frame by frame. Although we use a ring of pixels, this principle can be applied to any quantity representative of the system noise or background drift, including a single pixel; the goal is simply to subtract the representative background noise.

In Figures 2(a)–2(c), averaging windows are shown; these windows allow us to average temporally to further improve the precision of the steady-state ROI temperature at a given laser power. In this case, we average 10 s per power and increase the power from 0 to 30 mW over 5 points. For more thermally conductive samples, the wait and averaging times can be much shorter, typically < 5 s. The resulting relationship is shown in Fig. 2(d), which is the measured steady-state ROI temperature rise vs laser power (which was likewise determined by reading the power of the laser using its internal photodiode at each time step and averaging). The linear relationship is observed, and $\Delta T / \Delta P$ is determined. This is inherently a differential operation, equivalent to subtracting the baseline temperature, i.e., the temperature when the laser is off. An important benefit of using this relationship is that imperfections in surface properties, e.g., scratches or wrinkles in the transducer film, are offset by the differential so that the localized temperature rise from laser heating can be isolated. This can be clearly seen when comparing the raw thermogram in Fig. 2(e), which shows the representative infrared image of the sample when the laser is on at its highest power, and the differential thermogram in Fig. 2(f), which shows the same thermogram subtracted by the thermogram when no laser power is applied. This offset can be helpful for visualization, particularly in real-time during measurement setup, but mathematically makes no

difference in the end result since ΔT is already a differential. Overall, the measurement procedure allows us to take advantage of differential measurements in both time and space to negate the poor absolute temperature accuracy of the camera and instead take advantage of the relatively high sensitivity and resolution, respectively. Once data are collected, we fit a thermal model to the data to extract thermal conductivity. The full details on the temperature rise model are provided in the [supplementary material](#).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To demonstrate the capability of TOPS, we measure a wide array of samples ranging in thermal conductivity from 0.03 to $60 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$, including solids, liquids, and gels/pastes. The latter two categories were tested by applying a suspended layer of the transducer film over a vat that had an input and output port to add a liquid/gel/paste using a syringe; once the vat was full, a valve was closed to contain the sample within the vat, and testing was conducted using the same procedure applied to solid samples. [Table I](#) summarizes the measured values and how they compare with the literature values or, where applicable, what the manufacturer specifies. [Figure 3\(a\)](#) shows the relationship between the

measured and literature/manufacturer values. In general, we see excellent agreement between the literature and measured values. The uncertainty is representative of both spot-to-spot measurement differences (measurement uncertainty) and propagation of uncertainty for parameters in the thermal model (model uncertainty). A full explanation of the uncertainty calculation can be found in the [supplementary material](#). [Figure 3\(b\)](#) shows these uncertainties as a percentage vs the measured κ values determined by TOPS. In general, the spot-to-spot measurement uncertainty is small, typically $<1\%$. On the high end of thermal conductivity ($>30 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$), the total uncertainty becomes large due to the transducer's thermal resistance. Based on model uncertainty alone, we see that TOPS has a $<5\%$ uncertainty for κ ranging from 0.04 to $20 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ and a $<10\%$ uncertainty for κ ranging from 0.018 to $40 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$. Of course, these uncertainties and limitations are determined based on the specific experimental conditions of our setup. This suggests that adjusting these experimental conditions may allow for extending the measurement range of TOPS. For example, to measure a higher thermal conductivity range with less uncertainty, this may require (1) using a thinner or more thermally conductive transducer or (2) increasing the laser spot size. These concepts are discussed in further detail in the [supplementary material](#), which outlines a path to

TABLE I. Measured thermal conductivities for all samples tested.

Sample	TOPS κ ($\text{W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$)	Literature κ ($\text{W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$)
Solid samples		
Extruded polystyrene board insulation	0.0295 ± 0.0020	0.030^{a}
NIST SRM 1450e fibrous glass	0.0337 ± 0.0031	0.033^{a} , Ref. 47
Balsa wood	0.0481 ± 0.004	0.0484 , Ref. 48
Acrylic (PMMA)	0.185 ± 0.003	0.19 , Ref. 49
PEEK	0.246 ± 0.004	0.25 , Ref. 50
Borosilicate glass	1.15 ± 0.02	1.15 , Ref. 24
Quartz glass	1.38 ± 0.02	1.38 , Ref. 51
Fused silica	1.38 ± 0.02	1.38 , Ref. 51
Grade 5 titanium (Ti-6Al-4V)	6.80 ± 0.15	6.7 , Ref. 52
CaF ₂ optical window	12.1 ± 0.4	12 , Ref. 53
304 stainless steel	14.9 ± 0.6	14.9 , Ref. 54
Al ₂ O ₃ optical window	33.4 ± 3.0	34 , Ref. 55
Ge optical window	55.7 ± 7.9	60 , Ref. 56
Liquid samples		
Distilled water	0.63 ± 0.014	0.61 , Ref. 57
Propylene glycol	0.197 ± 0.004	0.196 , Ref. 58
Ethylene glycol	0.248 ± 0.005	0.254 , Ref. 59
99% isopropyl alcohol	0.137 ± 0.003	0.137 , Ref. 60
Gel/paste samples		
AOS300	0.98 ± 0.02	0.92^{b} , Ref. 61
AOSXT4	4.1 ± 0.1	5^{b} , Ref. 61
Complex 1381	0.84 ± 0.01	0.75^{b} , Ref. 61
DOW 340	0.69 ± 0.01	0.68^{b} , Ref. 61

^aIndependently measured using a guarded hot plate (ASTM C177).

^bManufacturer specified value.

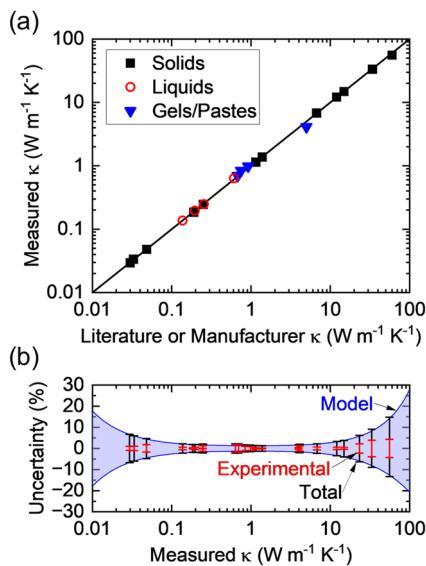


FIG. 3. (a) Measured thermal conductivity vs literature or manufacturer-specified thermal conductivity. Solid samples are depicted in solid squares, liquid samples are depicted in open circles, and gels/pastes are depicted in solid triangles. (b) Uncertainty as a function of measured thermal conductivity: model uncertainty is shown in the blue shaded region, experimental uncertainty is represented by red error bars, and total uncertainty (combining experimental and model) is represented by black error bars.

judiciously tailor these two parameters to maximize sensitivity to a target range of thermal conductivity.

For anisotropic materials, we are fundamentally measuring the geometric mean of thermal conductivity in spherical coordinates.⁶² Thus, for Al_2O_3 and balsa wood, the measured values are compared with their geometric mean counterparts in the literature. For balsa wood and woods in general, which are anisotropic by nature, κ is affected by density, porosity, moisture content, grain direction, and extractive content.⁴⁸ So, the results are expected to be variable by nature, which is what we see in the experiment and is reflected in the measurement uncertainty. Nonetheless, when compared to the average of the range of geometric mean thermal conductivities observed in the literature ($0.0381\text{--}0.0665 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$),⁴⁸ our measurement of $0.0481 \pm 0.004 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ falls in line. Similarly, the NIST SRM 1450e fibrous glass is a material fabricated using layers of discontinuous glass fibers bonded by a thermosetting resin.⁴⁸ While on the macroscale, this layering may induce some minor anisotropy; for our millimeter scale measurement, we do not observe any appreciable contribution to our measurement.

All TOPS measurements were conducted in the open air. When measuring low thermal conductivity materials such as foams, whose thermal conductivities approach that of the air, the impact of the air must be considered as part of the thermal analysis. In fact, air conduction, convection, and even radiation from the surface of the sample have been demonstrated to affect photothermal-based thermal property measurements.^{40,45} Figure 4 shows the relationship between $\Delta T/\Delta P$ and κ . Four thermal models are overlaid to show the effect of the air on the determination of the true thermal conductivity. When air and radiation are not considered at all (the sample

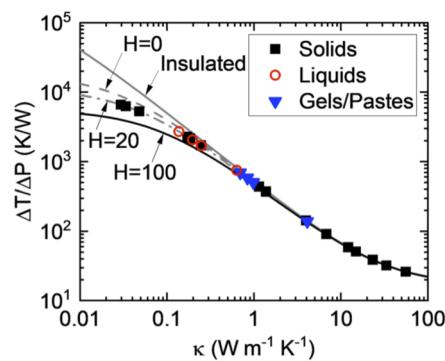


FIG. 4. Effect of air on the experimental results. Measured slope of temperature to power ($\Delta T/\Delta P$) vs thermal conductivity. Solid samples are depicted in solid squares, liquid samples are depicted in open circles, and gels/pastes are depicted in solid triangles. The lines indicate the thermal model with no consideration of air conduction or convection (insulated), only air conduction ($H = 0$), air conduction and $20 \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$ of convection ($H = 20$), and air conduction and $100 \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$ of convection ($H = 100$).

is assumed to be perfectly insulated at the surface), the expected $\Delta T/\Delta P$ matches the experimental data well for materials with a κ of $\sim 0.5 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$ and higher. However, below this value of κ , the model begins to diverge greatly from the $\Delta T/\Delta P$ we measure experimentally. Hence, one needs to account for air effects on the thermal conductivity, which can be added to the thermal model using a bidirectional boundary condition where heat can flow into the sample and into the air.⁴⁶ Air conduction proves to be the largest contributor to the thermal model, adjusting the thermal model to capture the true thermal conductivities for all but the most insulating samples ($\kappa < 0.1 \text{ W m}^{-1} \text{ K}^{-1}$). We next include the effects of convection as a boundary condition to the surface in the thermal model. A free convection coefficient of room temperature air for moderate temperature rises is on the order of $10 \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$.^{40,45} An additional contribution from radiation can be estimated by $4\sigma T_{\text{amb}}^3$,^{40,45} where σ is the Stephan-Boltzmann constant, to be $\sim 6 \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$ for an ambient temperature, T_{amb} , of 300 K. Thus, a reasonable combined convection coefficient is estimated to be somewhere around $16 \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$. Considering the full set of experimental data, we vary H to determine that a combined coefficient of 20 best captures the data, as shown in Figure 4. Also shown for comparison is the model using a forced convection coefficient of $100 \text{ W m}^{-2} \text{ K}^{-1}$. In this case, the model greatly under-predicts the measured $\Delta T/\Delta P$. While air conduction must always be considered for insulating materials, the effect of convection scales with laser spot size, so one can decrease the size of the laser beam to negate convection effects or increase the size to become more sensitive, opening the door to direct measurement of convection coefficients.

Having established the TOPS technique and validated its ability to measure thermal conductivity, we now push the technique to edge cases in order to assess its limits. To do so, we focus on three case studies: sample thickness dependency, sample edge effects, and surface roughness effects.

First, we consider the case of sample thickness. Similar to other localized thermal characterization methods, TOPS assumes a semi-infinite boundary condition in its analysis; that is, the depth of the

sample is assumed to be infinite in length relative to the heated volume such that heat flux, Q , is 0 at the back of the sample ($Q \rightarrow 0$ as $z \rightarrow \infty$). When the sample becomes thin enough relative to the heat source characteristic length, this assumption breaks down and an adjustment to the model is necessary. We experimentally determine this limit using three sample sets: borosilicate glass, quartz glass, and neoprene rubber (55A hardness). Figure 5 shows the thermal conductivity vs thickness for each set of data. The samples were each tested in two ways: suspended in the air so the backside of the sample was thermally isolated (solid symbols) and placed on an aluminum plate so that heat could flow away from the back of the sample (open symbols).

The borosilicate glass sample set consisted of thicknesses from ~19 mm down to ~3 mm. For all samples in this set that were measured on the aluminum plate, the experimental data had little to no thickness dependence (within uncertainty), indicating that the finite thickness does not affect the thermal model. However, when the sample set was thermally isolated, the 3 mm thick sample showed a minor deviation from the rest of the data, having a 6% reduction on average compared to thicker samples. The quartz glass sample set consisted of thicknesses from ~19 mm down to ~1.6 mm. The same trends as borosilicate can be seen in the quartz glass samples down to 3 mm. At 1.6 mm thickness, the quartz glass sample tested on an aluminum plate was measured as having an increased apparent thermal conductivity compared to that of a bulk sample, while the thermally isolated test measured a significant decrease in apparent thermal conductivity relative to the bulk sample, both well outside of what can be considered uncertainty. The apparent reduction in thermal conductivity is because the sample is suspended in the air, so the thermal penetration depth of the heated volume samples the air, which has a lower thermal conductivity than the quartz glass, reducing the apparent thermal conductivity of the measurement. Conversely, the aluminum stage has the opposite effect, increasing the apparent thermal conductivity of the sample by dissipating heat from the backside more effectively than the sample itself. Finally, we

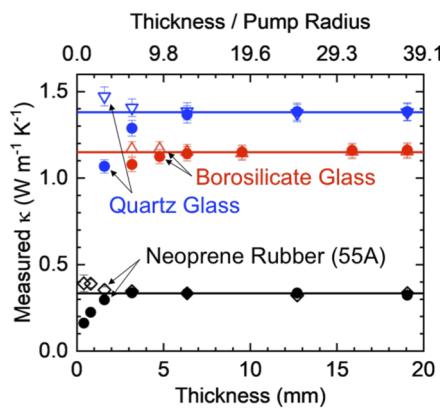


FIG. 5. Effects of thickness on measured thermal conductivity. Solid symbols indicate the measured values on the samples that were thermally isolated during the experiment (suspended in air), while open symbols indicate the measured values on the same samples placed on an aluminum plate during the experiment. Quartz glass, borosilicate glass, and neoprene rubber (55A hardness) are shown. The lines indicate the bulk values as measured on samples with >20 mm thicknesses.

studied a sample set of neoprene rubber, which had thicknesses of ~19 mm down to ~0.4 mm. In this case, we see the same trend as the prior sample sets, remaining constant down to 3 mm thickness. When isolated, at 1.6 mm thickness, the neoprene sample's apparent thermal conductivity is reduced, but smaller in magnitude than the previous cases because the neoprene is more insulating, so the backside air has a relatively smaller effect on the apparent thermal conductivity. For samples having thicknesses of 0.8 and 0.4 mm, we observe a deviation in measured thermal conductivity in both the isolated and non-isolated cases compared to the thicker samples. The isolated samples show a reduced apparent thermal conductivity, consistent with the two prior sample sets, while the non-isolated sample shows a higher apparent thermal conductivity due to the aluminum plate having a significantly higher thermal conductivity. As a note, the quality of the contact between the 0.4 mm sample and the aluminum plate dictates the thermal interface resistance between the sample and this plate. In the 0.4 mm thick sample, we observed significant measurement uncertainty from spot-to-spot measurements due to the sample's uneven contact with the plate when only being pressed down by its own weight. A more robust heat sinking method may greatly enhance the increase in apparent thermal conductivity with decreasing sample thickness.

Previous work on the depth-dependent temperature decay reveals that the $1/e$ temperature decay in depth occurs at approximately the $1/e^2$ Gaussian radius of the laser heating event.⁴⁶ Although this $1/e$ decay is conventionally referred to as the thermal penetration depth, this term is misleading in that the temperature profile extends well beyond this length, and thus any modifications of the sample beyond this length (e.g., finite thickness or boundary) can still affect the temperature at the surface. The analytical solution of the temperature decay is asymptotic toward 0 as depth into the sample approaches infinity. Practically, however, there is a depth at which the temperature has decayed enough that it does not affect the surface temperature. For thermally isolated samples, experimental data suggest the thickness should be at least $4\times$ the beam diameter. Placing the sample on a conductive heat sink helps provide a means to drive this requirement to $\sim 2 - 3\times$. Despite these limitations of using the semi-infinite model, it is possible to modify the model to account for a finite thickness by applying a backside boundary condition.⁴⁰

Next, we consider the effect of lateral sample dimension on the measurement, specifically the effect of breaking the radial symmetry of the temperature profile by approaching the edge of a sample. We conducted measurements on two samples: 304 stainless steel and acrylic, both of which are circular samples with a 50 mm diameter and 12.5 mm thickness. The measurement consists of adjusting the position of the laser beam center away from the edge of the sample in discrete points; exact distances from the edge were determined using the infrared image to count the pixels between the center of the heated region and the sample edge. Figure 6 shows the results of this study. For both samples, a reduction in measured thermal conductivity is observed as the distance to the edge approaches 0. This effect can be explained by the fact that heat is confined in one lateral dimension, which means one path for heat dissipation has been restricted; the result is a higher temperature within the region of interest, thus reducing the apparent thermal conductivity in that area. This effect occurs between 1 and 1.5 mm for acrylic and is more pronounced in 304 stainless steel, occurring around 2 mm from the

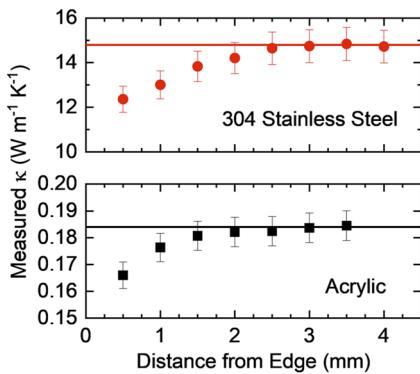


FIG. 6. Effect of the sample edge on a measurement: Measured thermal conductivity (top) of 304 stainless steel and (bottom) of acrylic vs distance of the center of the heated region from the edge. The symbols indicate the measured data, and the solid lines represent the thermal conductivity near the center of the sample, at least 20 mm from the edge.

edge. Note that the first point (0.5 mm) from the edge is the closest the laser can physically get to the edge without clipping the sample edge. In fact, taking a measurement with the beam at the 0 position, where half the beam is clipping the sample edge, resulted in an increased κ almost twice the bulk κ due to the fact that only half the power was being absorbed by the sample.

This case study shows that such a deviation between edge κ and bulk κ may initially be viewed as a limitation of TOPS, but it highlights a major advantage of TOPS in its capability to resolve *local* κ . That is, the measured κ is representative of the effective κ near the edge of a sample, where this confinement effect would have real implications on a device dissipating heat. As a comparison, traditional lock-in and step thermography techniques rely on fitting a model of temperature rise vs distance from the heated center region out to several multiples of the beam radius away from

the center to derive the bulk κ . In contrast, TOPS relies on a local measurement of the temperature within about $2\times$ the beam diameter. As such, TOPS is far better suited for non-uniform samples with various surface defects that would otherwise distort the temperature profile globally but not locally. Combined with the differential nature of the measurement, TOPS proves to be highly robust for localized thermal measurements.

Finally, we consider the effect of surface roughness on the measurement. To do so, we study four materials ranging three orders of magnitude in thermal conductivity: 304 stainless steel, grade 5 titanium, quartz glass, and acrylic. Surface roughening was performed on each set of these materials using aluminum oxide sand blasting. The surface roughness was varied by exposing the sample to sand blasting for incrementally longer periods of time. The roughness was then quantified using mechanical profilometry to obtain an average root mean square (RMS) roughness and standard deviation from three scans on each sample. We find that this surface roughening procedure had varying impacts on the different materials. Quartz glass showed the most significant roughness range, having an upper average RMS roughness near $10\ \mu\text{m}$. The other three materials were not able to be roughened nearly as much, having a maximum average RMS roughness of about $2.5\ \mu\text{m}$ for acrylic, $2.3\ \mu\text{m}$ for stainless steel, and $1.6\ \mu\text{m}$ for titanium.

Figure 7 summarizes the results of this study. Beginning with 304 stainless steel, Fig. 7(a) shows the measured thermal conductivity vs average RMS roughness to reveal two distinct regions of data: a constant measured κ with roughness and a linearly decreasing measured κ with roughness. A polished control sample was included in the study for reference to highlight when this transition becomes significant enough to deviate from experimental uncertainty; the shaded region shows the error band for the control sample thermal conductivity. In order to determine the cutoff roughness where deviation occurs, we fit a piecewise linear function to the data (represented by the line going through the data) to capture both distinct regions and use the transition point to indicate the cutoff

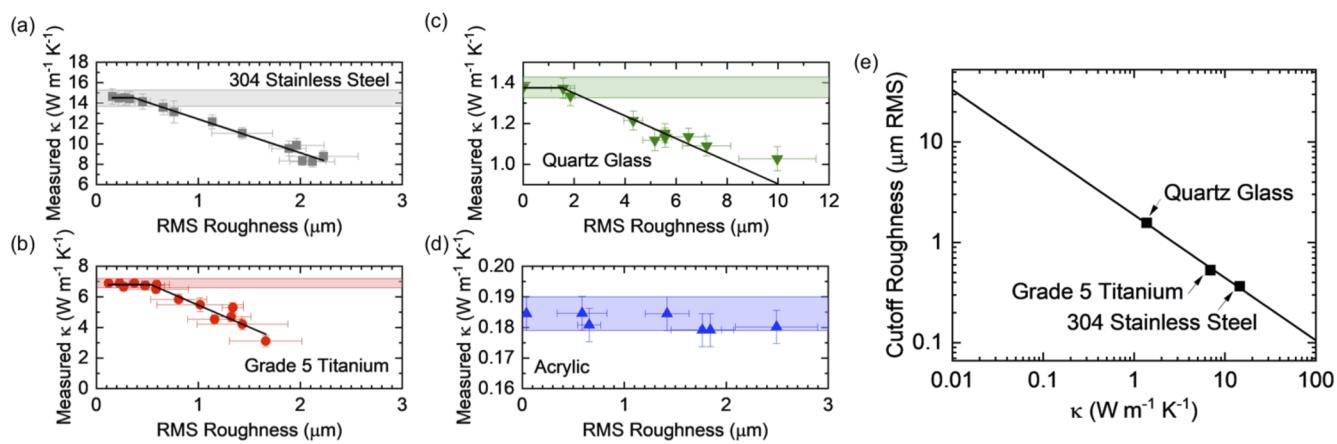


FIG. 7. Effects of roughness on measured thermal conductivity: Measured κ vs average RMS roughness for (a) 304 stainless steel, (b) grade 5 titanium, (c) quartz glass, and (d) acrylic. The symbols and error bars indicate the experimental data, and the shaded region represents the thermal conductivity bounds (including the total uncertainty range) of the control sample. The lines represent a piecewise linear fit to the data to characterize the distinct regions of (1) constant κ with increasing roughness and (2) decreasing κ with increasing roughness. (e) Relationship between cutoff roughness and κ . The symbols show the measured data, and the line shows a best-fit logarithmic function.

RMS roughness. This exact procedure is repeated for (b) grade 5 titanium and (c) quartz glass to obtain a cutoff average RMS roughness. As shown in Fig. 7(d) for acrylic, we were not able to obtain a cutoff because the average RMS roughness could not be increased enough to measure any significant reduction in thermal conductivity. Nonetheless, with the data we have from stainless steel, titanium, and quartz glass, we can establish an empirical relationship between the cutoff average RMS roughness and the sample thermal conductivity. Figure 7(e) shows this relationship, which proves to be a logarithmic function as shown by the best fit line displayed. With the caveat that the dataset is limited to just three data points and, thus, limits confidence in extrapolation, it is nonetheless instructive to apply this function to the extremes to assess the potential limits to TOPS. On the low-end of κ , very rough samples can be measured without loss of accuracy. This explains why we were not able to roughen acrylic enough to measure a reduction in κ ; we would need to roughen it to an RMS roughness of more than $5\ \mu\text{m}$ to begin to measure any reduction. On the high end of the κ range, relatively smooth samples are necessary for measurement. An average RMS roughness of 100 nm or less is needed for a material with a thermal conductivity of $100\ \text{W m}^{-1}\ \text{K}^{-1}$. From a practical perspective, obtaining such roughness levels is obtainable via mechanical polishing techniques for most materials. In the experimental data presented in Table I, all samples had roughness levels well below the cutoff roughness threshold estimated using this rule of thumb, such that roughness was not a concern.

Assessing the physical reason for this roughness dependency, we first note that TOPS is an optical technique relying on heating via laser absorption and temperature measurement via infrared thermography, both of which can be affected by surface roughness. The surface emissivity can increase with roughness,⁶³ which would result in a higher apparent temperature rise for the same applied laser power. Similarly, increased surface roughness can lead to increased laser absorption,⁶⁴ again leading to a higher temperature rise for the same applied laser power. Both of these would lead to a reduced apparent thermal conductivity. However, these would require the transducer layer to match the surface roughness of the sample when applied, perfectly fitting into the peaks and valleys of the sample surface. In reality, air gaps form between the transducer and sample such that the transducer is, on average, smoother than the sample. Moreover, if emissivity and absorption were the culprits, the cut-off RMS roughness would be the same for all materials. Instead, we attribute the reason for the reduction in measured κ with increasing roughness to an increasing thermal interface resistance between the transducer and sample due to the aforementioned imperfect contact at the interface. When this thermal interface resistance becomes large enough, the assumed thermal model does not properly capture this effect by default, leading to a reduced apparent thermal conductivity.

IV. SUMMARY

In conclusion, in this paper, we have demonstrated a Thermo-Optical Plane Source (TOPS) technique for thermal conductivity measurements. Using laser heating to induce a localized steady-state temperature rise at the surface of a sample that is detected using infrared thermography, the relationship between power and temperature is used to directly measure a material's thermal conductivity

without any knowledge of heat capacity or density. We demonstrate a frame-by-frame spatial temperature correction and temporal differential measurement approach to make highly accurate thermal measurements with an entry-level IR camera, effectively improving accuracy by two orders of magnitude compared to the intrinsic temperature accuracy of the camera. We use this approach to measure the thermal conductivity of solid, liquid, and gel/paste samples ranging from 0.03 to $60\ \text{W m}^{-1}\ \text{K}^{-1}$, accounting for environmental effects to ensure measurements can be done in the open air, even for highly insulating materials. Furthermore, we show the robustness of the technique by demonstrating it is insensitive to sample thickness down to $2\text{-}3\times$ the laser beam diameter and highly resilient to sample roughness. Altogether, TOPS offers a universal approach for simple, accurate, and high-throughput thermal conductivity measurements.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

The [supplementary material](#) is included to provide details on the following: a derivation of the thermal model used to determine thermal conductivity, sample preparation, ways to potentially increase the measurement range via transducer selection, and uncertainty analysis.

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AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

Conflict of Interest

The authors are all employees of Laser Thermal, a company that manufactures and sells commercial thermal conductivity measurement tools.

Author Contributions

Jeffrey L. Braun: Conceptualization (lead); Data curation (lead); Formal analysis (lead); Investigation (lead); Methodology (lead); Writing – original draft (lead). **Bryan N. Baines:** Data curation (equal); Investigation (supporting); Methodology (supporting); Writing – review & editing (supporting). **John T. Gaskins:** Conceptualization (supporting); Investigation (supporting); Methodology (supporting); Writing – review & editing (supporting). **Patrick E. Hopkins:** Conceptualization (supporting); Investigation (supporting); Methodology (supporting); Writing – review & editing (supporting).

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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