

Description



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Circuit arrangement for operating an illuminated sign

5 The invention relates to a circuit arrangement for
operating an illuminated sign, as claimed in the
precharacterizing clause of claim 1. Illuminated signs
based on light-emitting diodes instead of incandescent
lamps are being used increasingly in many areas,
10 especially for signaling. Light-emitting diodes are
comparatively cost-effective, have a long life and
produce a strong light. However, it is difficult to use
them where incandescent lamps are intended to be
replaced by LED illuminated signs without any changes
15 to the drive. This is particularly true of light signal
circuits for railroads, in which correct operation is
generally monitored by current measurement which is
safe from the signaling point of view. In order to
allow this monitoring still to be used without any
20 changes, the current/voltage characteristic of the LED
illuminated sign must correspond approximately to that
of an incandescent lamp.

A further special feature is signaling outside tunnels
25 or environmental conditions with approximately constant
light characteristics. In this case, the circuitry must
provide a reduction in the light power for night time
operation, in comparison to that for daytime operation.
The light sensitivity of the human eye during daytime
30 differs by a factor of approximately 1000 from the
light sensitivity at night. If the light power is not
reduced at night, dazzling is therefore possible even
in the case of lights which are barely perceptible in
the daytime. However, it is essential to avoid
35 dazzling, particularly for road or rail traffic, since
there is a risk of other signals effectively possibly
being overlooked due to the excess radiation. In the
case of light signals based on incandescent lamps for



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railroad purposes, the brightness is controlled between
daytime and

night by the control mechanism using the supply voltage or the supply current. Since the light power of an incandescent lamp depends exponentially on the supply voltage or the supply current, a small change in the supply current or the supply voltage leads to a major change in the light power. This means that the supply current or the supply voltage need be reduced only to about 2/3 of the initial value in order to reduce the light power, for example, to 20% of the initial light intensity. In order to achieve a similarly advantageous characteristic profile for light-emitting diodes, a proposal has been made, according to DE 198 46 753 A1, for a drive circuit to be connected in parallel with each light-emitting diode. This has the disadvantage that the achievable difference between the light power in the daytime and the night is relatively small. Furthermore, component tolerances which lead to different forward voltages on the light-emitting diodes, transistors and other components, as well as the influence of temperature on the forward voltages, are not compensated for.

The invention is based on the object of overcoming these disadvantages and of specifying a circuit arrangement of this generic type which allows an increased dynamic range between daytime and night light power.

According to the invention, the object is achieved by the characterizing features of claim 1. By presetting the parallel current which does not flow through the light-emitting diode, the light power of the light-emitting diodes can be controlled over a very wide range. However, in this case, it is necessary to accept the fact that the light-emitting diode current is not constant as a function of the operating voltage in the daytime and night voltage range.

According to claim 2, the light-emitting diode can be supplied with a constant current by means of the further controlled current source for presetting the light-emitting diode current.

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However, it is also possible to achieve a constant current flow without any further controlled current source. According to claim 6, this is done by controlling the parallel current as a function of the operating voltage, rather than by keeping it constant.

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However, it is also possible to improve the current constancy by controlling the operating voltage in an appropriate manner, as claimed in claim 6.

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According to the embodiment characterized in claim 3, a nominal/actual value comparison is carried out by means of a comparator for the parallel current to be controlled and, if appropriate, also the light-emitting diode current to be controlled. The nominal value of the respective current is in this case preset by predefined switching thresholds, which predetermine when the corresponding currents should be switched on and off. The switching thresholds may be analogue continuous presets or else purely digital information, which then preferably has hysteresis.

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In one advantageous development according to claim 4, the switching threshold has temperature compensation and/or forward voltage compensation applied to it. The temperature compensation compensates for component characteristics which vary as a function of the temperature. The forward voltage compensation compensates for different forward voltages of the light-emitting diodes that are used. For example, it is feasible for the light-emitting diodes which are used to be subdivided into forward

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voltage groups, from which the appropriate light-emitting diodes to be fitted are selected.

One important characteristic of the overall
5 arrangement, is according to claim 5, that it can
produce a current even at low voltages. This function
protects the circuit arrangement against input external
energy, which can occur when the circuit arrangement is
being supplied in a relatively long distance. Even when
10 the input external energy is at the maximum level to be
assumed, the voltage which is built up across the
light-emitting diode must remain less than the forward
voltage of the light-emitting diode. This prevents the
light-emitting diode from starting to illuminate
15 inadvertently when external energy is flowing - an
interference voltage.

The invention will be explained in more detail in the
following text using illustrations in the figures, in
20 which:

Figure 1 shows an outlet circuit diagram of a circuit
arrangement for operating an illuminated sign,

25 Figure 2 shows a first embodiment of a drive circuit,

Figure 3 shows a characteristic profile of the drive
circuit shown in Figure 2,

30 Figure 4 shows a second embodiment of a drive circuit,
and

Figure 5 shows a characteristic profile for a drive
circuit as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 1 shows a general configuration of an LED signal with n drivers T , with each driver T controlling at least one LED D . At least one LED controller St is connected in parallel with each of the LEDs D . One pole of the LED controller St is connected directly to the operating voltage U , while the other pole is connected in series with a resistor R to the operating voltage U . The resistor R is distinguished by having a defined failure behavior, that is to say certain defects, for example complete short circuits, are so improbable that, effectively, they do not occur. The resistors R are furthermore designed such that faults, for example a short circuit, of the LED D or LED controller St have only a minor effect on the overall current drawn by the circuit arrangement. For example, in the event of a short circuit of the LED controller St in the case of an LED signal with 60 drivers T , the total current would increase by only about 5%.

A first embodiment of a driver T is shown in Figure 2 as a detail of the LED signal from Figure 1. The LED controller St sets a current I_P in parallel with the LED D . This is done by using a controlled current source. A comparator, in this case an operational amplifier OPV , is connected on the input side to a switching threshold Sch , which represents a nominal value, and to an actual value sensor Act . On the output side, the operational amplifier OPV acts on a parallel path to the LED D . The switching threshold Sch predetermine when the parallel current I_P should be switched for daytime operation, or night operation or to an idle level. The switching threshold Sch itself has temperature compensation Tk and forward voltage compensation Fk applied to it. The temperature compensation Tk compensates for temperature-dependent component characteristics, while the forward voltage compensation Fk takes account of LED-specific forward voltages. The actual valve sensor

Act processes the operating voltage U and/or the operating current of the entire LED signal, although the actual value can also be preset by further information, such as additional control lines from a control mechanism or else by information which is encrypted in the supply current or in the supply voltage U . The current source for the parallel current I_P is designed such that it can produce a current even at low voltages. In consequence, input external energy, whose order of magnitude depends to a major extent on the length of the supply line, is short-circuited in such a way that it is impossible for a high voltage to build up, or for the LEDs D to start to illuminate as a result of the external energy.

Figure 3 shows the supply-voltage-dependent current profile of the parallel current I_P and of the current I_{LP} flowing through the LED D in comparison to a conventional incandescent lamp G . The figure shows a resistance line W , which is governed by the resistors R , as would occur if only the resistors R were present, and there were no drivers T or LEDs D . The resistance line W describes the maximum possible current flow through the circuit arrangement according to Figure 2 as a function of the operating voltage U . With this circuit embodiment, the voltage is reduced at night by controlling the parallel current I_P . As can be seen from Figure 3, the LED current I_D is not constant either in the daytime or in the night time voltage range.

A circuit embodiment with an additional LED current controller is suitable for achieving a constant current flow. A circuit arrangement such as this is shown in Figure 4. In this case, the parallel current I_D and, in addition, the LED current I_D as well are controlled by means of controlled current sources. Figure 5 shows the associated current profile. The

current that is set and hence the signal brightness are ideally constant during daytime operating as well as during night time operation.

- 5 When the signal is switched off, $0 \leq U_{\text{night min}}$, the signal does not illuminate even when input external energy is present. The LED current I_D is $= 0$. However, the parallel current I_P ideally corresponds to the maximum possible current. Any input external energy is
10 short-circuited by this parallel current I_P , so that it is impossible for any voltage to build up that will cause the LEDs D to illuminate.

- During night time operation $U_{\text{night min}} \leq U_{\text{night max}}$, the LED controller St sets the LED current
15 $I_D = I_{D\text{night}}$ through the LED D. The LEDs D illuminate with a low light power level. The parallel current I_P ideally corresponds to the difference between the current which is defined by the resistors R
20 and LED current I_D .

- During daytime operation $U_{\text{day min}} \leq U_{\text{day max}}$, the LED controller St sets the LED current $I_D = I_{D\text{day}}$ through the LED D. The LEDs D illuminate with the
25 maximum light power. The parallel current I_P once again corresponds to the difference between the current which was defined by the resistors R and the LED current I_D .

- 30 In the overlapping area between daytime and night time operation, the hysteresis for the parallel current I_P and the LED current I_D results in the LED signal remaining in a stable state.

- 35 The circuit arrangement shown in Figure 4 represents a very convenient embodiment. The LED signal is safe in the signalling sense of the word, has high stability,

is virtually free of temperature and component
fluctuations, and

provides a very wide dynamic range between daytime and night time operation. However, this convenience involves a correspondingly high level of circuitry complexity. This high level of complexity can preferably be countered by means of integrated technology. Simplified versions are also feasible, providing only some of the functionalities, with reduced complexity.

One embodiment takes account of the fact that the maximum possible light power shall be achieved during the daytime while, however, at night the light power is limited to a defined level. For this purpose, the LED current I_D is kept constant only in the range between $U_{\text{night min}}$ and $U_{\text{night max}}$, while the maximum possible LED current I_D of $I_P = 0$ is used in the range between $U_{\text{day min}}$ and $U_{\text{day max}}$.

A further embodiment relates to the configuration for DC and AC voltage. For this purpose, LED controllers St can be equipped with appropriate rectified diodes. When operating using AC voltage, it is worthwhile designing the LED controller St such that root mean square values are used for the comparison with nominal values, rather than instantaneous values of the actual values.

It is also possible to design an LED controller St for both DC voltage and AC voltage, since an LED controller St for AC voltage also operates in the DC voltage mode. However, in this case, it should be remembered that different switching thresholds Sch may possibly be required. The required voltage type can be selected by means of externally accessible programming.

The invention is not restricted to the exemplary embodiments specified above. In fact, a number of variants

are feasible which make use of the invention even with the features being configured in fundamentally different ways.

Patent Claims

1. A circuit arrangement for operating an illuminated sign, in particular an LED signal, having at least one
5 light-emitting diode (D), with which a resistor (R) is connected in series and a controller (St) is connected in parallel,
characterized in that,
the controller (St) has a controlled current source for
10 presetting a parallel current (I_P) which reduces the current (I_D) flowing through the light-emitting diode (D).
2. The circuit arrangement as claimed in claim 1,
15 characterized in that,
the control circuit (St) has a further controlled current source for presetting a current (I_D) flowing through the light-emitting diode (D).
- 20 3. The circuit arrangement as claimed in one of the preceding claims,
characterized in that,
the controlled current source has a comparator whose inputs are acted on by a switching point (Sch) and an
25 actual value sensor (Act).
4. The circuit arrangement as claimed in one of the preceding claims,
characterized in that,
30 the switching threshold (Sch) is acted on by temperature compensation (Tk) and/or forward voltage compensation (Fk).
5. The circuit arrangement as claimed in one of the
35 preceding claims,

characterized in that,
in order to preset the parallel current, the current
source has means for driving a current such that, with
the maximum external energy that can be expected to be
5 input, the voltage which builds up across the light-
emitting diode (D) is less than the forward voltage of
the light-emitting diode (D).

6. The circuit arrangement as claimed in one of the
10 preceding claims,
characterized in that,
the parallel current is preset by means of a
controlling operating voltage (U) for the illuminated
sign.