Rectifying junctions of tin oxide and poly(3-hexylthiophene) nanofibers fabricated via electrospinning

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Rectifying junctions of tin oxide and poly(3-hexylthiophene) nanofibers fabricated via electrospinning

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A fast, simple, and inexpensive method to fabricate in air, p-n diodes using electrospun tin oxide nanoribbons and regioregular poly(3-hexylthiophene) nanofibers is described. In addition to being a rectifier under ambient illumination or in the dark, the advantage of our design is the complete exposure of the rectifying nanojunction to the surrounding environment, making them attractive candidates in the potential fabrication of low power consumption diodes and sensors. The diode characteristics were analyzed using the standard diode equation and its use as a UV light sensor was examined. © 2009 American Institute of Physics. [DOI: 10.1063/1.3089878]

Most solid state devices incorporate at least one interface between a p- and an n-type semiconductor, hence the p-n junction is the focus of much research. The discovery of organic conducting conjugated polymers3 made it possible to fabricate reliable devices and sensors in ordinary laboratory conditions. Metal oxides are also desirable materials for use in devices.2 Of particular interest is tin oxide (SnO2) (Refs. 3 and 4) as it is stable in air, optically transparent, and semiconducting, with a band gap of ~3.4 eV. The simplest and easiest hybrid device to fabricate is a diode in which a junction of an organic conducting polymer with an n-doped inorganic semiconductor is formed. Such architectures have been typically realized via spin coating8 or electrochemical polymerization.6,7 Earlier, we reported on the fabrication of hybrid Schottky nanodiodes via electrospinning.8 Herein, we report on the same method to fabricate in air and within seconds, p-n diodes, by simply crossing n-doped SnO2 and p-doped poly(3-hexylthiophene-2–5-diyl) (P3HT) nanofibers. The devices operate well under ambient illumination or in the dark, with on/off ratios of ~25. Although several studies have been done on SnO2/P3HT composites,9–11 primarily for use as sensors, this is the first study on p-n diodes fabricated using nanofibers of pure P3HT and nanoribbons of SnO2. The advantage of our design is its quasi-one-dimensional feature and the complete exposure of the nanojunction to the surrounding environment making them attractive candidates in the potential fabrication of low power, supersensitive, and rapid response sensors and rectifiers.

The p-n diodes were fabricated from SnO2 nanoribbons and P3HT nanofibers prepared via electrospinning. The sols used in the electrospinning process were prepared as follows: 2 ml of commercially available tin(IV) isopropoxide, 10% w/v in isopropanol/toluene (Alfa-Aesar) was thoroughly mixed with a 0.5 ml of a 0.7 wt % polyethylene oxide (MW 2000,000) (PEO) in CHCl3. In a separate vial, 26 mg of regioregular P3HT (Aldrich) and 1 mg of PEO were dissolved in 3.0 g of CHCl3. First, the tin precursor was electrospun in air at 10 kV and doped Si++ (0.01–0.05 Ω-cm) wafers with a 200 nm oxide layer were used to capture long (several mm) ribbons of the precursor.8 The substrates were then heated in air at 700 °C for two hours to yield SnO2 nanoribbons that were seen to firmly adhere to the substrate. The P3HT sol was then electrospun in air at 5 kV and individual P3HT nanofibers were captured on the same substrates as before. Several P3HT nanofibers were seen to intersect the SnO2 ribbons, each intersection resulting in a p-n diode. For electrical characterization, one such junction was identified and electrical contact pads evaporated using an appropriate transmission electron microscope (TEM) grid as a shadow mask. Figure 1(a) shows an optical microscope image of the P3HT nanofiber intersecting a SnO2 nanoribbon, together with portions of the gold contacts. Using an atomic force microscope, the ribbon and the fiber height were measured to be around 100 nm. The P3HT nanofiber was about 2 μm and the SnO2 ribbon was about 30 μm wide. External electrical contacts were then made and the device current-voltage (I-V) characteristics were measured via a Keithley 6517A electrometer in a vacuum of ~2 × 10–2 Torr. The inset in Fig. 1(a) shows a schematic of the device and the external electrical circuit. Diodes were also fabricated by simply placing a P3HT/CHCl3 drop over the SnO2 nanoribbon as seen in Fig. 1(b) and electrically characterized.

Figure 2 shows the I-V characteristic curves at 296 K of the device shown in Fig. 1(a) tested in air and in vacuum. Several diodes were tested and, in general, the I-V character-

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**FIG. 1.** (Color online) (a) Optical microscope image of a SnO2 ribbon crossed with a P3HT nanofiber. The inset is a schematic of the external electrical connections. (b) Optical microscope image of a SnO2 ribbon crossed with a P3HT cast film. The ribbon width was ~60 μm and the silver contacts are made directly to the active materials.
rectification ratio.

P3HT FET lower than reported values.3,12,13 Since the electrospinning
negative positive
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back gate biases shows the nanofiber. This diode also shows rectification with a
measured currents are larger due to the increased film
length and width, respectively. 

3.4 eV, respectively, and when used in a FET configura-
tion, show that they make Ohmic contacts with Au (5.1 eV)
electrodes. The essential features of the asymmetric nonlinear I-V curves in Fig. 2 can thus be understood qualitatively based on the energy band diagram for a planar structure in bulk p-n junctions.14 Diffusion of charge carriers (polarons in P3HT and electrons in SnO2) across the junction sets up an electric field of opposite polarity that prevents further diffusion and creates a space charge region depleted of all mobile charge across the interface. Band bending through the space charge region helps establish a constant Fermi level in thermal equilibrium resulting in a built-in potential barrier to the flow of electrons from the conduction band of SnO2 moving into the lowest unoccupied molecular orbital level of P3HT, as shown in the lower inset to Fig. 2. Applying a positive potential to the n-region with respect to the p-region lowers the Fermi energy in the n-region increasing the barrier height, preventing charge diffusion, and hence limiting current flow (reverse bias). Applying a positive potential to the p-region with respect to the n-region lowers the Fermi energy in the p-region, decreasing the barrier height in the p-region and allowing for charge diffusion across the junction, which constitutes a current (forward bias) that increases exponentially under bias voltage as governed by the Fermi–Dirac occupancy function. Under such conditions, in an ideal diode, the current-voltage curve can be described by the equation

\[ I = I_s \left( \exp(eV/k_B T) - 1 \right) \]

where \( I_s \) is the reverse bias saturation current, \( e \) is the electronic charge, and \( n \) represents the ideality factor; \( k_B \) and \( T \) represent the Boltzmann factor and temperature, respectively. Figure 4 shows the diode characteristics near the turn-on region and the inset shows the semilogarithmic plot of the diode current versus applied voltage under forward bias conditions. Extrapolating the linear portion of the semilog plot to zero bias yields a
reverse bias saturation current of 0.022 pA and the diode ideality factor was calculated to be $n \approx 2.2$.

Being transparent, SnO$_2$ is insensitive to visible light, but its conductivity is enhanced in the presence of UV light ($\lambda=365$ nm). This is most likely due to the removal of adsorbed oxygen species releasing the surface bound electrons that contribute to the observed current and due to photoexcitation of electrons from the valence to the conduction band,$^3,4$ which motivated us to test the diode as a light sensor. Figure 5 shows these results in an as prepared device.

In summary, we present a facile and inexpensive method of fabricating p-n diodes in air and within seconds using the electrospinning technique. The diodes show clear evidence of rectification in air or in vacuum, under ambient illumination or in the dark, with a rectification ratio of $\sim 25$. The device was analyzed using the diode equation and yielded an ideality parameter of $2.2$ and a turn-on voltage in the range of $0.2–0.4$ V. These low turn-on voltages are beneficial for polymer based electronics that currently operate under high biases. Device parameters could be improved by using crystalline materials at the expense of compromising the simple fabrication technique outlined here. UV light exposure increases the diode on state current, while light removal resets the device. Diodes were also fabricated by drop casting films of P3HT over individual SnO$_2$ ribbons, but were relatively less sensitive to UV light. The high surface to volume ratio of the nanofiber, low turn-on voltages, and response to UV light, make this device attractive for use as low power consumption diodes and reusable sensors.

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