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Abstract
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Parallel-chain optical transmission line for a low-loss ultraconfined light beam

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Linear arrays of plasmonic nanoparticles have been suggested by various groups as optical waveguides. Here, inspired by the concept of optical nanocircuits, we show that it is possible to improve the performance of such waveguide chains by pairing two of them, forming a two-wire optical transmission line. We show that choosing the operation regime near the light line may greatly reduce the effect of material absorption and disorder, still allowing field confinement in between the paired chains. Application for low-loss optical interconnects and subwavelength imaging devices are envisioned. DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevB.80.113101

The interface between metals and insulators is known to support optical guided modes in the form of surface plasmon polaritons, which under certain conditions may travel over several wavelengths.1,2 If one wants to squeeze the beam so that its total transverse cross-section is subwavelength, plasmonic waveguides may be realized in the form of cylindrical waveguides (nanorods)3,4,16 or linear chains of closely spaced nanoparticles.5,17 Due to their design flexibility, the propagation properties of linear chains may be tailored at will, effectively realizing laterally confined optical connectors. Experimental realization of such devices in the nanoscale, however, has shown severe losses, mainly caused by material absorption and disorder.

At optical frequencies, both the chain and nanorod geometries are characterized by a serious trade off between field concentration and propagation losses: for beams highly concentrated around a nanoscale waveguide, which are necessarily slow wave in nature, the real part of their wave number Re[β] is usually larger than the background wave number k0, material absorption and disorder17 strongly affect the propagation, and the propagation distance is reduced exponentially with increase in the lateral confinement of the beam.3,4,16 Consider, for instance, the geometries in the inset of Fig. 1(a), i.e., a chain of silver nanoparticles and a cylindrical waveguide made of silver, both of radius a = 10 nm, embedded in a glass substrate. The period of the linear chain is d = 2.1a, both geometries are excited with azimuthally symmetric modes with longitudinal component of electric field (analogous to the current flowing along a conducting wire at low frequencies) and in our analyses the frequency dispersion and material losses for silver, as found in the literature,18 have been fully considered. The curves are obtained using full-wave analysis, consistent with the solutions in Refs. 4–16, which for the case of linear chains take into account all the dynamic coupling among the infinite number of particles in the array.

Figure 1 reports the propagation length (defined as the length after which the guided field is e−1 of the original value) and Re[β]/k0 for these two geometries, as depicted in the inset. It is evident that the cylindrical nanorod (black line) supports longer propagation length and lower attenuation constant at low frequencies (far IR), for which silver behaves as a fairly good conductor. In this regime, Re[β] = k0 and, similarly to a regular thin conducting wire at microwave frequencies, the field is spread all around the cylinder in the background. If we increase the frequency of operation, up to the visible, however, Re[β]/k0 increases, together with the field confinement around the plasmonic cylindrical interface, and the propagation length is consequently reduced. The chain of nanoparticles (red lighter line) has some relevant advantages over a cylindrical nanorod: the frequency range over which Re[β] = k0 may be shifted as desired up to optical frequencies by properly choosing the relevant parameters in the design. It can be seen in Fig. 1 that in this specific example the chain hits the light line (Re[β] = k0) in the mid visible (f = 560 THz, green light), and consequently a substantial improvement in the propagation length may be achieved in this frequency range. The price to be paid also in this geometry, however, is the less confined beam, i.e., larger beam cross-section spread in the surrounding background material, associated with the condition Re[β] = k0.

It is interesting to interpret these results in terms of optical nanocircuit theory:19,20 since it has been shown that plasmonic and nonplasmonic nanoparticles behave equivalently as nanoinductors and nanocapacitors, respectively, then, due to the specific longitudinal orientation of the electric field, the chain of nanoparticles may be modeled as a series cascade of inductors and capacitors, representing the silver nanoparticles and the gaps separating them, as in the inset of Fig. 1(b). It is clear that a judicious choice of the nanoparticle geometry and spacing may produce a series resonance between such an LC pair, causing a short-circuit connection. In this regime, the chain is expected to effectively behave as an ideally conducting wire, as long as losses are negligible, implying the condition Re[β] = k0, even though no single material (here silver) is ideally conducting in this frequency regime. For the design of Fig. 1, this condition is satisfied at f = 560 THz, for which the chain resembles a conducting wire with Re[β] = k0. As a consequence, the field is not much confined around this chain and instead it is spread in the background. It is evident that this frequency may be moved
at will by varying the geometry of the chain and the background material. Would it be possible to confine the beam, avoiding the field spreading associated with the condition Re[β]=k_0, and at the same time still keep the advantage of low-attenuation propagation?

To this end, inspired by the solution available at micro-waves and in regular circuits, we borrow the concept of two-wire transmission lines, i.e., paired conducting wires that may support transverse electromagnetic (TEM) waves confined in the space between them. By pairing together two chains of nanoparticles near their Re[β]=k_0 condition we may heuristically envision an analogous behavior, which may be obtained as modes, providing the modal dispersion for this geometry, which may be taken into account by considering the polarizability fields induced by each chain on the other. In the limit of interest here, and for this polarization of interest, the coupling induced between the two chains. For a single isolated chain, for e^{iβk}, the corresponding guided wave number β satisfies the following closed-form adimensional dispersion relations:

\[ L = 3d^{-1}f_3(\tilde{β},\tilde{d}) - idf_3(\tilde{β},\tilde{d}) - \tilde{α}^{-1} = 0, \]
\[ T = -\frac{3}{2}d^{-1}f_3(\tilde{β},\tilde{d}) - idf_3(\tilde{β},\tilde{d}) - d^{-2}f_3(\tilde{β},\tilde{d}) - \tilde{α}^{-1} = 0, \] (1)

for longitudinal and transverse modes, respectively, where \( f_3(\tilde{β},\tilde{d})=L_{N}(e^{i(\tilde{β}+1)\tilde{d}})+L_{N}(e^{-i(\tilde{β}-1)\tilde{d}}), \) \( L_{N}(z) \) is the polylogarithm function of order N (Ref. 21) and all the quantities have been normalized, consistent with Ref. 16, as \( \tilde{d}=k_0d, \tilde{β}=β/k_0, \) and \( \tilde{α}=k_0^2α/6πε_0. \) Implicitly, an \( e^{-i2πft} \) time convention has been assumed.

When \( l \) is finite in Fig. 1, the coupling between the two chains implies a modification of their guidance properties, which may be taken into account by considering the polarization fields induced by each chain on the other. In the limit of interest here, and for this polarization of interest, the dominant contribution from one to the other chain is provided by the first-order cylindrical mode supported by each chain. Specifically, as described in Ref. 16, at sufficient distance from the dipoles, each chain may be described as an averaged current line with amplitude \( -iωpe^{iβl}/d, \) with \( p \) being the eigenvector corresponding to the solution of Eq. (1). Each current line radiates a dominant cylindrical wave with vector potential

\[ A = \frac{ωμ_0}{4} p H_0^{(1)}(\sqrt{k_0^2 - β^2})e^{iβl}, \] (2)

where \( H_0^{(1)} \) is the cylindrical Hankel function of first kind with order \( n \) and \( p \) is the radial coordinate in the cylindrical reference system. This radiation contributes an additional polarization field on the other chain, which may be described in terms of coupling coefficients between the two chains.

The final closed-form dispersion relation for the coupled modes, providing the modal dispersion for this geometry, may be obtained as

![FIG. 1. (Color online) Propagation properties of linear plasmonic waveguides. (a) Frequency dispersion of propagation length and (b) guided wave number for a cylindrical nanorod made of silver and for a linear chain of spherical silver nanoparticles, as in the inset of panel (a). Both geometries have radius \( a=10 \) nm, the chain period is \( d=2.1a. \) In the inset of panel (b): nanocircuit model of a chain of plasmonic nanoparticles. At the crossing of the wave number with the light line, the nanoinductors and nanocapacitors support a series resonance, with guidance properties analogous to those of an ideally conducting wire at low frequencies.](113101-2)
modes from the chains for tighter coupling, but this is beyond the interest of the present Brief Report.

The coupled modes supported by this geometry, as depicted in the inset of Fig. 2(b), induce two distinct longitudinal modes, one with symmetric distribution of the polarization currents along two chains (black lines), the other with antisymmetric properties (red lines). Clearly, we are interested in this latter mode, which resembles the current in the two-wire transmission lines. Figure 2 reports the variation in $\text{Re} [\beta]/k_0$ and the propagation distance for these two modes, compared with those of an isolated chain. In this example, the distance between the chains is $l=3a$ for Figs. 2(a) and 2(b) and $l=6a$ for Fig. 2(c).

It can be seen from Fig. 2 that the propagation distance for the twin chains is only slightly deteriorated for the antisymmetric mode, when compared to the isolated chain, but at the advantage of a much more confined beam traveling in the space between the two chains, due to the oppositely directed (i.e., antisymmetric) polarization currents traveling along the chains. Working exactly at the light line is not convenient due to the strong unwanted transverse coupling. However, at slightly higher frequencies and over a relatively wide frequency range spanning green and blue lights in this example, the antisymmetric mode may still operate relatively close to the light line, ensuring both low attenuation and high field confinement between the two chains. Increasing the distance between the chains, as in Fig. 2(c), may further improve the situation, allowing optimum field guidance over several wavelengths.

Figure 3 reports the distributions of the transverse (normal to the plane of the figure) magnetic field and real part of the Poynting vector (power flow) on the $y$ axis (cross-sectional line connecting the two chains) for the geometry of Figs. 2(a) and 2(b) at the frequency $f=585$ THz. The antisymmetric and symmetric modes, together with the case of an isolated
with larger nanoparticles, consistent with our results for individual linear arrays. In this case, also higher level of material losses may become more manageable, for instance, allowing us to employ gold or other plasmonic materials, arguably having some advantages from the technological standpoint, but usually higher absorption than silver. The above analysis may fully take into account the effects of material losses and size variation, analogous to what was presented in Ref. 16. We will present a complete analysis applied to this parallel-chain configuration in a future extensive paper.

There may be several advantages in operating these optical nanowaveguides for different applications. The relatively long propagation distance over multiple wavelengths and strong field confinement in the (lossless) region between the two chains may be exploited for optical interconnects in nanocircuit applications, in order to connect different nanoloading at will, operating analogously to ideal connectors in low-frequency circuits. This operation has been heuristically suggested in Refs. 2, 19, and 24 and it has been fully established here with this parallel-chain geometry. Optical nanofilters analogous to those introduced in Ref. 25 and feeding lines for optical nanomaterials may be introduced following these designs.26,27 Moreover, the tight guidance and confinement of these nanotransmission lines and their operation as quasi-TEM waveguides are ideal requisites for subwavelength imaging devices based on canalization, as those recently introduced at microwave frequencies using conducting wires in Ref. 28.

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