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ECE 3110  
8 December 2023

### Alternative Semiconductor Materials

The majority of the content of our ECE 3110 class has considered the use of silicon in semiconductor devices, but silicon is not the only semiconductor material available. Through the course of this paper I will consider the other types of semiconductor materials that are used commonly, how and why they're used, and their differences when compared with silicon. Semiconductor devices have changed the way our world works, and further developments are constantly being researched in an attempt to find devices that can do more for less energy used. The uses of semiconductor devices extend far beyond computation devices such as computer processors. The robust utility of semiconductors means that they've found their way into just about every electronic device we see today, and the magic behind a semiconductor lies in the fact they possess properties of both a conductor and an insulator.

The discovery of these electrical properties of semiconductors can be attributed to many people and began over 150 years ago. The very first instances of discovering semiconductor properties in materials can even date back to Faraday's observations regarding electrical conductivity in relation to temperature. This study dates back to the year 1833, but it would be a long time before people began thinking of semiconductors as such extremely useful devices. Another important discovery in the early development of semiconductor thought includes the experiment of Alexandre-Edmond Becquerel. When he experimented with the electrical properties of electrolytes, he one day "noted that, if one of the electrodes was illuminated with sunlight, the emf generated between the electrodes increased." (Jenkins). These first discoveries of semiconductor properties opened the gateway to many new ways to experiment with electricity. Doors were opened and discoveries began to pour in. Other important discoveries in the timeline of semiconductors include observations from Willoughby Smith and Heinrich Hertz, who had similar findings regarding photoconductivity in the late 1800s, and another late 1800s discovery regarding rectification in the contacts between metals and some oxides and sulfides. Discoveries like these poured out over the course of several decades and led to increased thought and innovation in the area.

Moving forward to the 1920s and '30s, there was a significant increase in demand for radar and other forms of communication due to the impending war. Under this pressure, and with the recent discovery of bipolar conduction in semiconductors (being the flow of current due to both electrons and holes moving), the scientific scene was ready for heavy increase in the development of semiconductor devices. The two primary material subjects of semiconductor research were silicon and germanium, though many materials possess the desired qualities in semiconductor behavior. Discoveries surrounding the p-n junction and its manufacture paved the way to new applications of diodes that could support more current flow. This eventually led to the discovery of transistors.

The advent of transistors led the way to many new technologies, and silicon quickly became the favorite material for semiconductor development. The main reasons that silicon is used in integrated circuits today are plenty. Silicon is one of the most abundant resources found

here on Earth, meaning that it is relatively cheap and was more readily available for experimentation and testing. More important than cost, though, was the material properties and electrical properties that made it so special. Silicon boasts amazing reliability in diverse conditions, and has shown the ability to operate as intended in extreme weather and temperature conditions. As silicon was adopted in the industry, manufacturers would decide to make devices out of silicon so that they could be compatible with already built devices, and so that the manufacturing processes could source from others as well.

The current methods for manufacturing silicon chips have been through many renditions and revisions to get where they are today. Each manufacturing company may have their own processes to build the chips, but the process roughly follows this same outline. Silicon chips are cut from wafers of silicon. After a purification process to find produce a raw crystal of silicon, thin wafers are sliced from a large ingot. They are then cleansed and polished to make sure that the surface is free and defect free. Any small defects in the wafer now can prevent operation in the integrated chip once it's done. Once they've produced a clean silicon wafer it undergoes a process that produces an oxidized  $\text{SiO}_2$  layer on top of the silicon which acts as an insulating material. The insulated silicon wafer then undergoes a photolithography stage which defines the patterns for the various components on the integrated circuit. After an etching process, the silicon wafer undergoes what is possibly the most important step when considering the use of semiconductors. This is the doping stage, where impurities are introduced into the silicon and modify its electrical properties. Creating separate regions of p-type and n-type concentrated areas allows the semiconductor silicon to act as diodes and transistors. These produce the computational logic of the chip and allow it to work as intended. Often times, a silicon wafer undergoes lithography, etching, doping and deposition multiple times to correctly build the proper design on the silicon chip.

These manufacturing techniques have been developed over years of experimentation with silicon chips, thus, silicon quickly became king of the semiconductor field. The discoveries, developments, and innovations in the realm of electronics have increased greatly in this era of silicon dominated semiconductor materials, but, as we saw from years of electronic research and experimentation, silicon isn't alone in its electrical properties. Other materials are commonly used as semiconductors in electronics today, including germanium, gallium arsenide, gallium nitride, and others. Their strengths are separate from those of silicon, thus they find their own place in the world of semiconductor use. Many semiconductors, including the ones just previously listed, are made of alloys consisted of Group III and Group V elements on the periodic table. Gallium belongs to Group III and has been paired in experimentation with several Group V elements and found to have unique properties that make it especially useful in specific areas, such as the area of optoelectronics.

Gallium arsenide (GaAs) has been found very useful in the area of optoelectronics. It has a higher electron mobility than silicon, which makes it useful in high frequency applications, such as radar systems, satellite communication devices, etc. Research is currently being done in the realm of building computer processors out of GaAs because of its strengths in these areas which could allow it to overcome some shortcomings of silicon-based semiconductor devices. The major roadblocks that keep silicon in the spotlight when it comes to semiconductor devices, is the cost of materials and manufacturing. One of the most common processes required for the manufacturing of GaAs semiconductor devices is the use of molecular beam epitaxy.

Molecular beam epitaxy (MBE) isn't just a process used for the creation of GaAs

semiconductor devices, it can also be used for other Group III-V semiconductor materials.

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