

Micro-Light-Emitting Diode ("Micro-LED") arrays: Overview and applications

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Talk outline

1. IOP overview and history

2. LED basics:

1. p-n diode and electroluminescence
2. Materials systems
3. Growth and fabrication
4. Typical LED characteristics

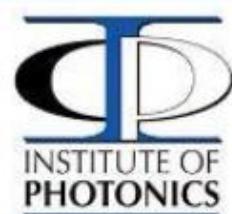
3. GaN micro-LEDs:

1. Development of micro-LEDs
2. Addressing schemes and structures
3. Prospects for full-colour arrays
4. Integration with CMOS backplanes

4. Applications:

1. Displays
2. Visible light communications
3. Navigation via. “Structured Light”
4. Fluorescence lifetime measurements
5. Mask-free photolithography & opto-electronic tweezing
6. Optogenetics

5. Summary and future prospects



Institute of Photonics

Established 1995



UNIVERSITY of STRATHCLYDE
**TECHNOLOGY &
INNOVATION CENTRE**

**Cumulatively in excess
of £20M of funding as
principal investigators
from EPSRC alone**

**Over 100
contracts with
industrial
partners**

**Central role in the
formation of the
UK's first Fraunhofer
Centre, mLED
Ltd, CST Ltd and
Photonix Limited**

**Three Royal Academy
of Engineering
Research Fellows and
a Fraunhofer/RAEng
Chair in Advanced Laser
Engineering**

**60 staff and students
with a principal
investigator
complement of 10**

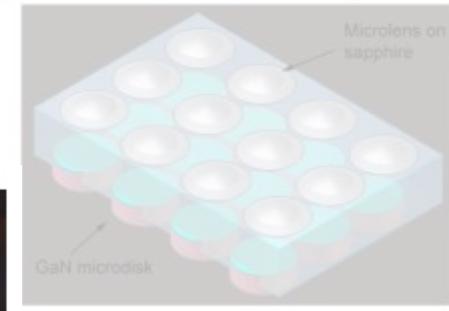
**Graduated over 70
PhD-level students,
many of whom
now work for local
industry**

**12 photonics laboratories and a clean room
microfabrication facility (totalling over 1000m²)
in the University's flagship Technology &
Innovation Centre**

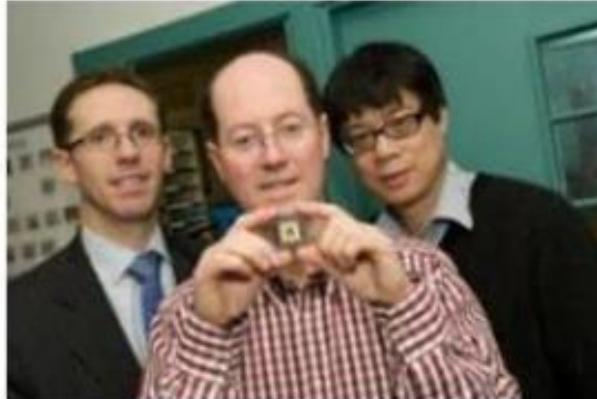
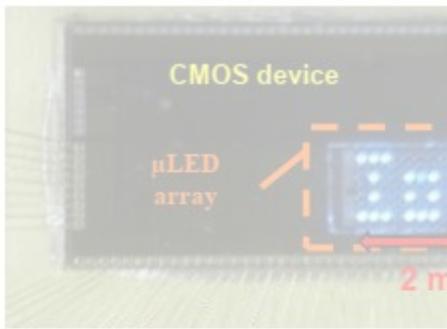
Some micro-LED milestones in the group

- Started our own fabrication of these devices in **2001**

128 x 96 monochrome matrix addressed arrays ($12 \times 12 \mu\text{m}^2$ pixels) , plus integrated microlenses by **2004**



First CMOS driven devices



Est. 2009
Sold 2016

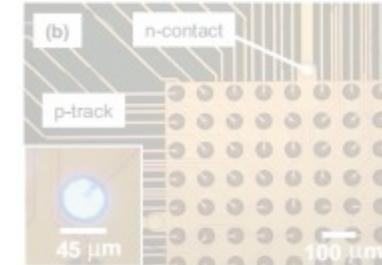
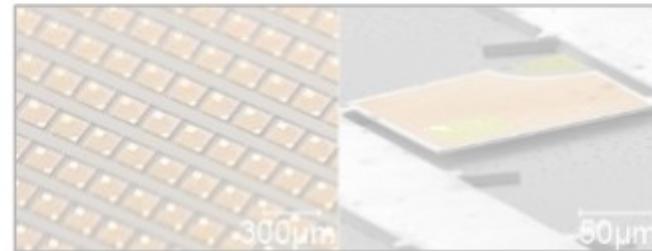
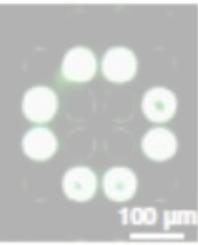
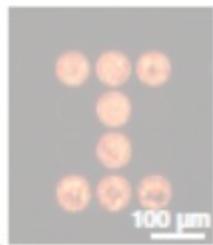


IR conversion in **2007/8**

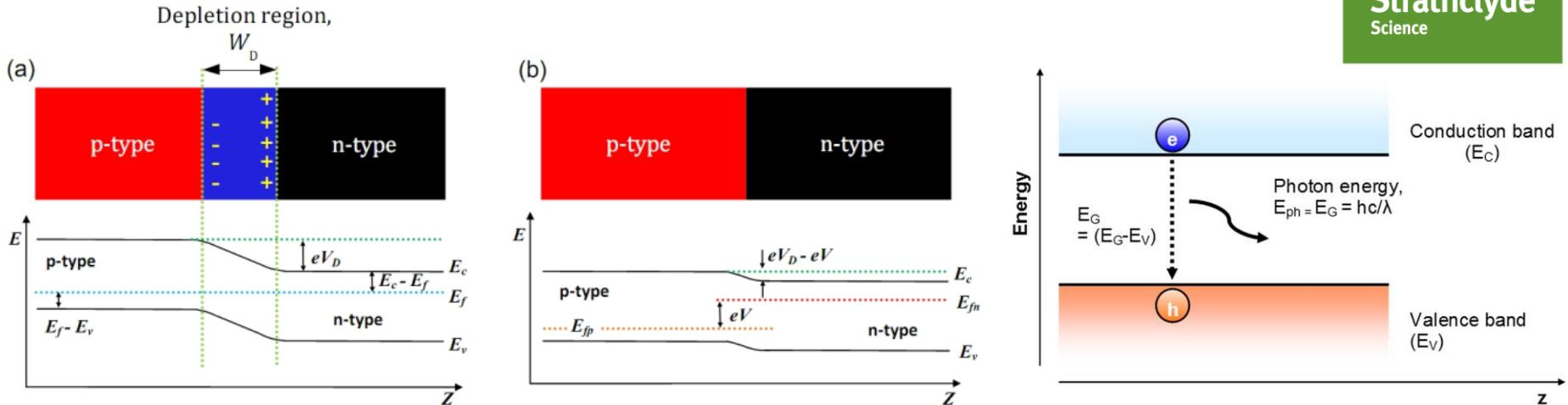


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Current density dependent colour/bandwidth **2012**, transfer printing **2013**, GaN/Si micro-LEDs **2013/14**



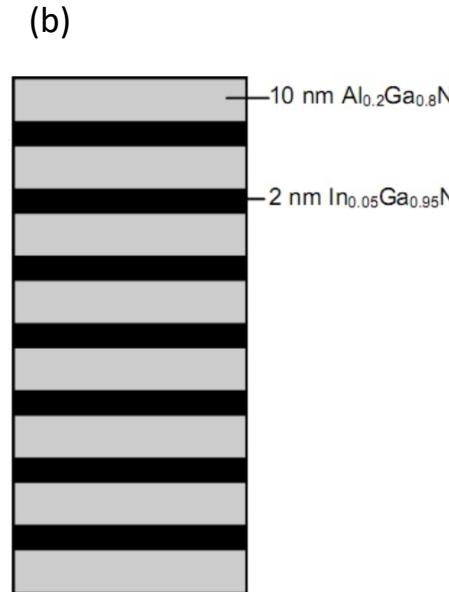
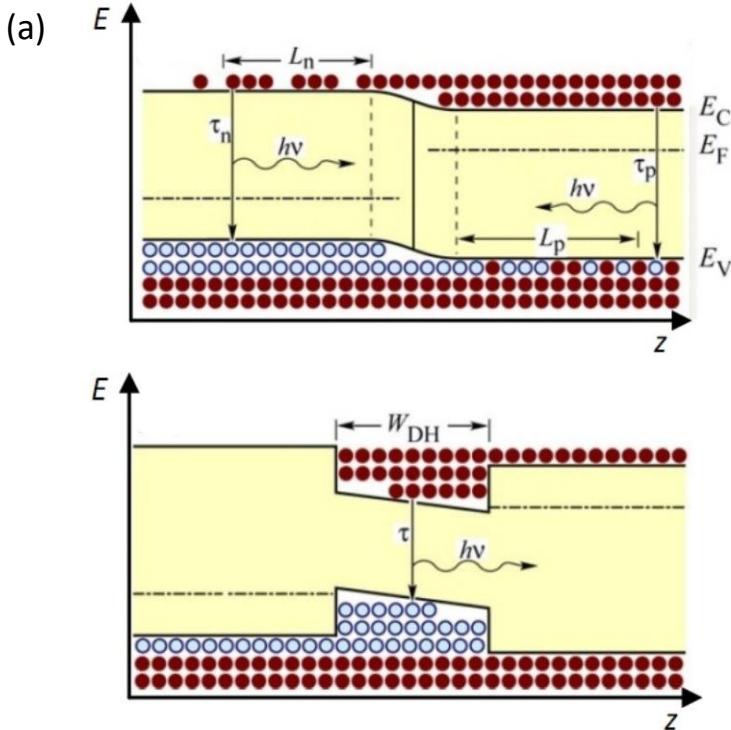
Basic p - n diode



LED under (a) zero and (b) forward bias. (c) electroluminescence

- Simplest form of diode – Holes(electrons) diffuse from the p-type(n-type) material into the adjacent n-type(p-type)
- Creates a depletion region that prevents current flow, figure (a)
- Forward biasing the diode (+ve voltage from p to n) counteracts the depletion region, figure (b). Current can flow if the forward bias is high enough.
- Current only flows in one direction!
- Electrons from the conduction band combine with holes in the valence band (c).
- Energy lost (E_G) during this transition is (ideally) released as a photon

Quantum well structures



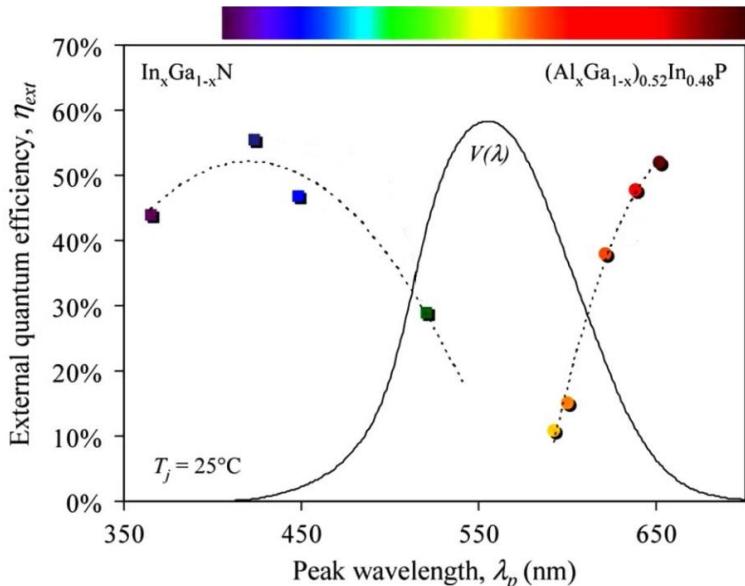
(c)

$$E_G = \frac{n^2 h^2}{8mL^2}$$

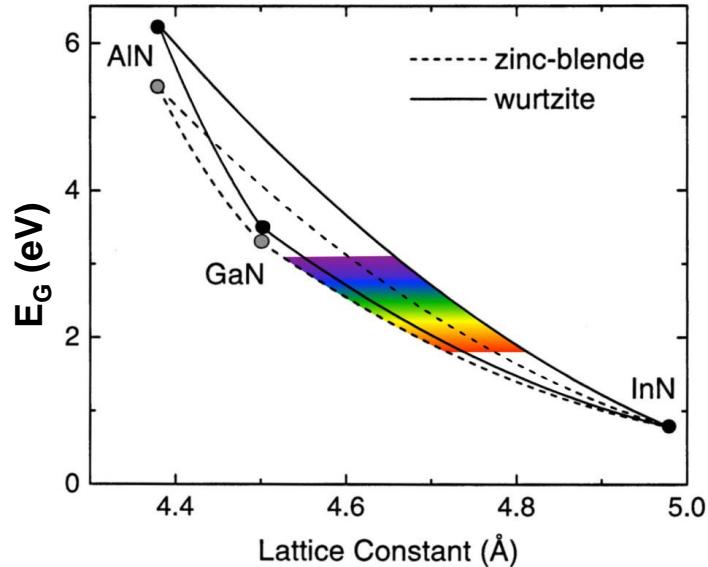
n = integer
 h = Planck's constant
 m = particle effective mass
 L = well width

- Practical LEDs rarely use simple p-n structures. Low carrier density (N) leads to a low radiative recombination rate (R), and thus inefficient recombination:
 - $(R = BN)$, where B is the radiative recombination rate
- LEDs use multiple “quantum wells” (b) to confine carriers in a narrow length for efficient recombination.
- Careful engineering of QW thickness also allows tuning of E_G (c)

Materials systems



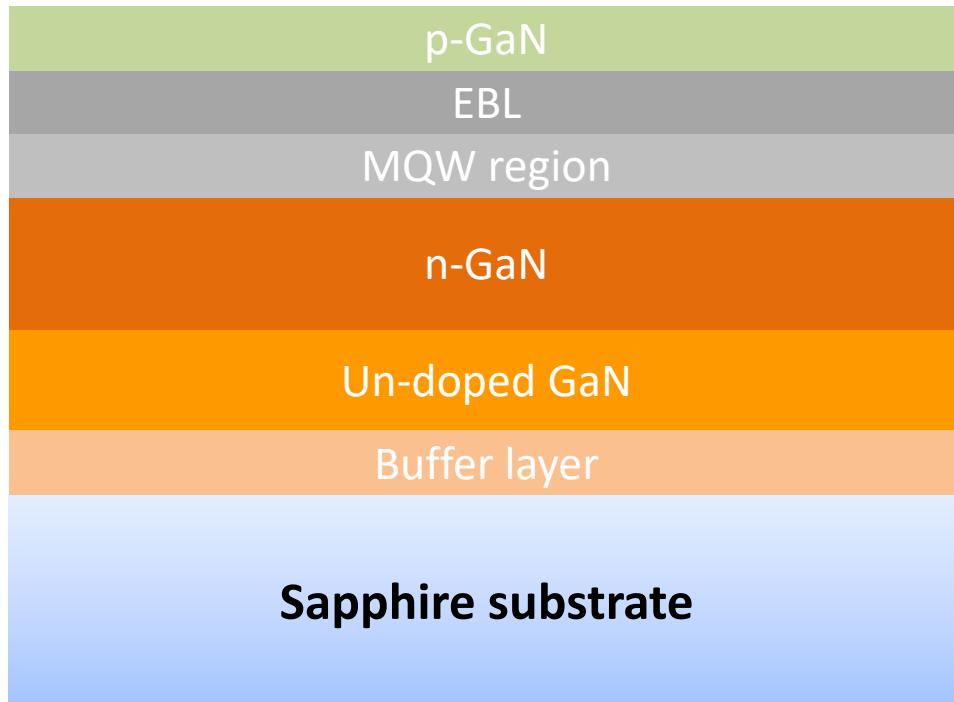
M. Crawford, IEEE Journal of Sel. Topics in Quantum Electronics, Vol 15, p1028 (2009)



Vurgaftman & Meyer, JAP, 94, 3675 (2003)

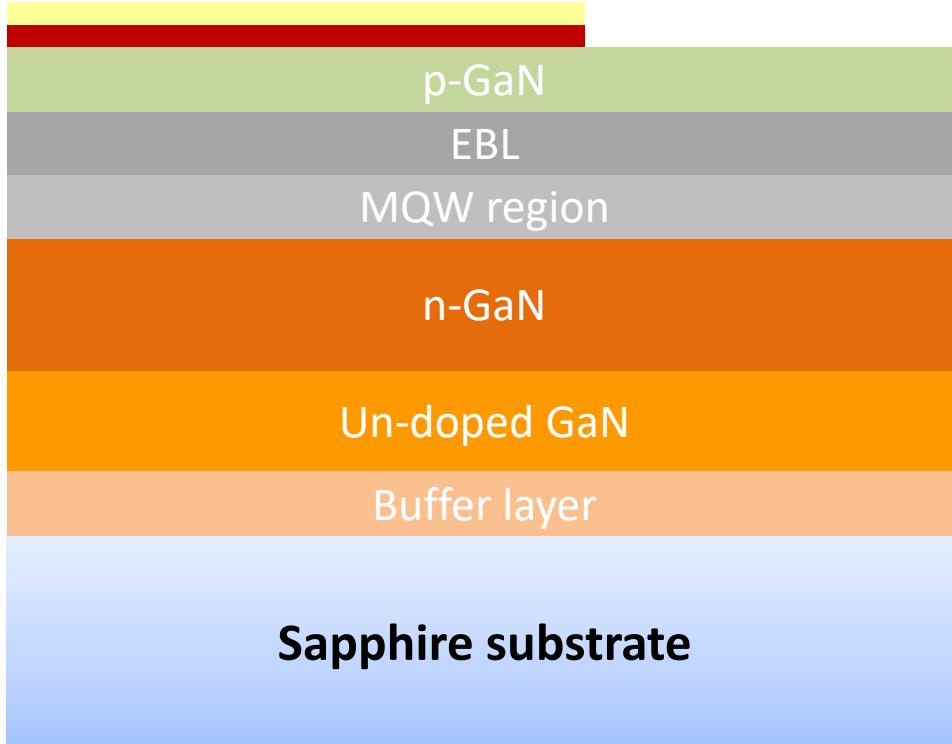
- E_G can be engineered by growing LED structures from different semiconductor alloys, adjusting the alloy composition, and adjusting the thickness of Quantum Well active regions.
- Different alloy systems can cover different parts of the spectrum
 - “Green-yellow” gap still exists where there is a lack of efficient green/yellow emitters

Typical structure and process flow



1. Begins with lattice-matched growth substrate, e.g. sapphire or Si ($300\ \mu\text{m}$ thickness)
2. Thin “buffer layer” of unintentionally-doped GaN by MOCVD ($25\ \text{nm}$)
3. Thicker layer of un-doped GaN ($2\text{-}3\ \mu\text{m}$)
4. Layer of doped n-type GaN ($1\text{-}2\ \mu\text{m}$)
5. Multi-quantum well (MQW) active region ($100\ \text{nm}$)
6. Electron-blocking layer ($100\ \text{nm}$)
7. Layer of doped p-type GaN ($200\text{-}300\ \text{nm}$)

LED basics – growth and fabrication



1. Pattern the p-GaN surface using photolithography
2. Dry-etch (RIE or ICP) down to the n-GaN
3. Deposit metal contacts and current-spreading layers (Ni/Au, Pd, 100 nm)
4. Deposit SiO₂ passivation layer
5. Package and bond LED die

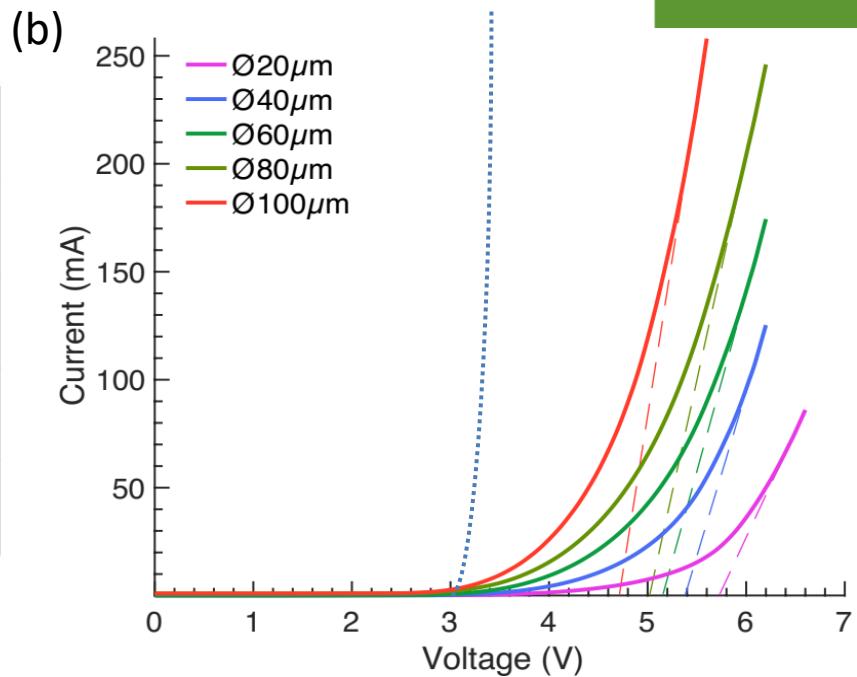
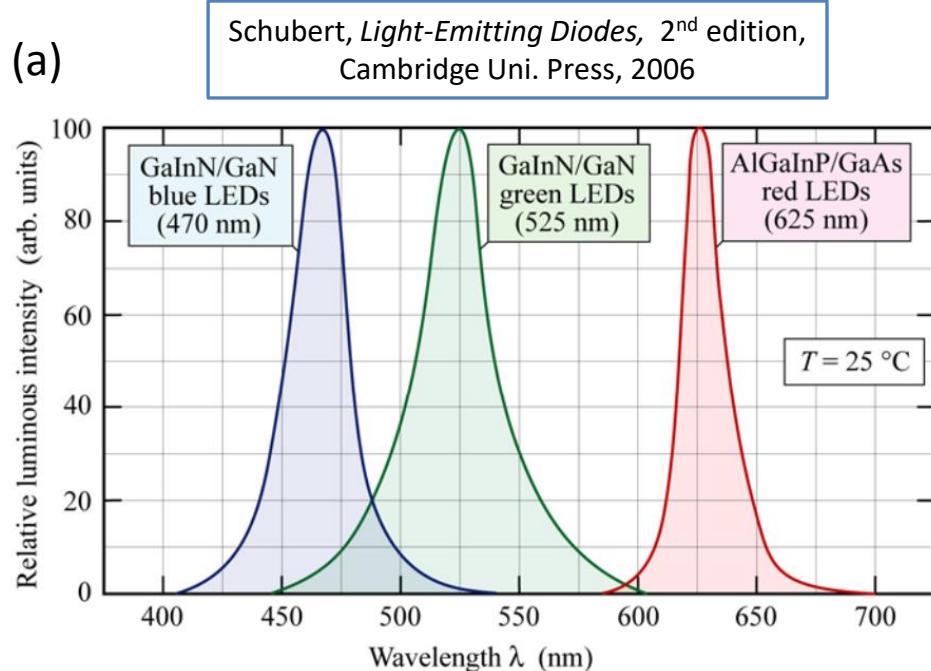
GaN-based LED – structure and growth process varies in different materials systems!

Growth substrates (GaN)

Sapphire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low cost & plentiful • Large area (2") • Acceptable performance • Optically transparent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electrically insulating • Large lattice mismatch (13%) • Poor thermal conductivity
Si	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potentially very cheap • Very large areas (6") • Electrically conductive • Improved thermal conductivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging growth • Coeff. of thermal expansion (CTE) mismatch • Large lattice mismatch (16.9%) • Opaque
Metallic substrates (e.g. Cu)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small lattice mismatch • Excellent thermal conductivity • Electrically conductive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large thermal expansion mismatch • Unstable at high growth temps.
Free-standing GaN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matched lattice constant and CTE • Electrically conductive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very high cost • Large areas not available

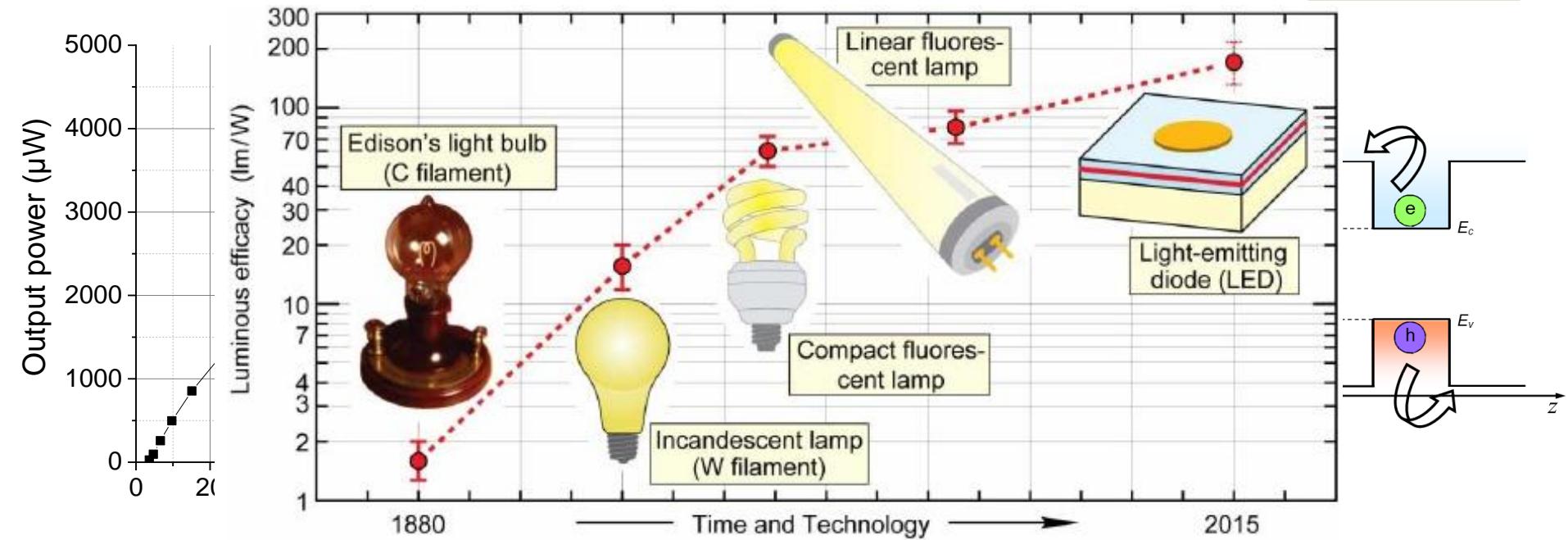
- Choice of epitaxial growth substrate vitally important
- Sapphire is currently the most commonly used for GaN LEDs

Typical characteristics: I-V



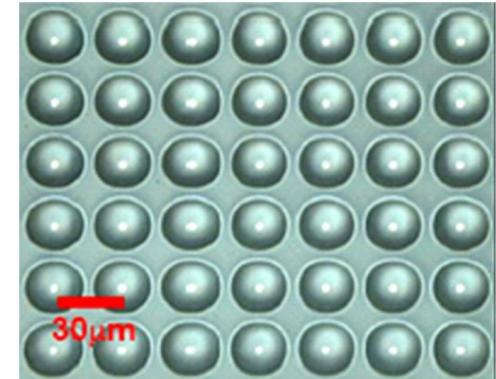
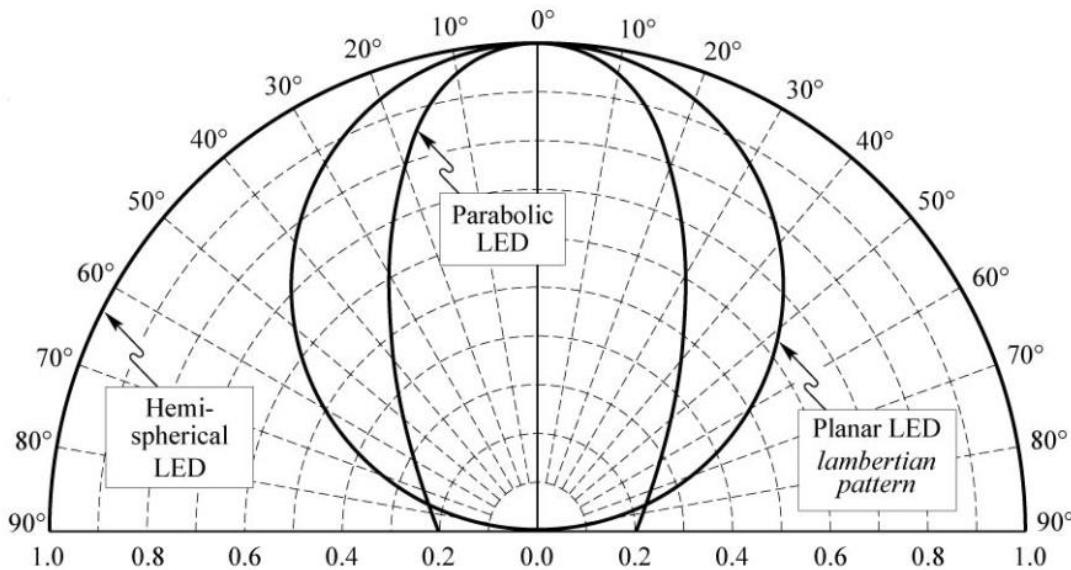
- Typical emission spectra (a) – peak wavelength largely determined by E_G
 - Peak wavelength will vary due to heating effects, variations across the wafer...
 - Distribution of carriers and states gives the emission spectra their shape
 - FWHM typically on the order of 20 nm. Still perceived as monochromatic by eye
- Real LED I-V behaviour deviates from “ideal diode”
 - Parasitic effects, e.g. series and shunt resistances
 - Depend on material properties and device structure

Typical characteristics: L-I and efficacy

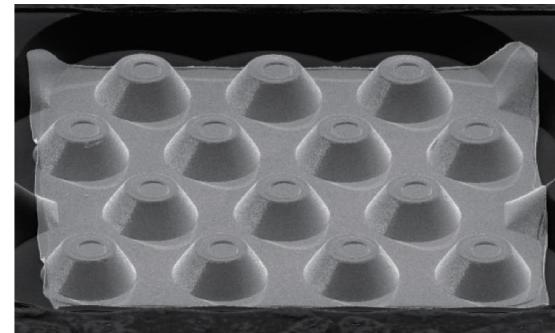


- At low currents the LED output increases approximately linearly with increasing current
- At higher currents the output “rolls over” as non-radiative recombination effects begin to dominate:
 - (a) Shockley-Read Hall, (b) Auger recombination, (c) carrier-overflow
 - Non-linearity and drop in efficiency need to be considered for application
- Nevertheless, LED efficacies still significantly exceed conventional light sources

Typical characteristics: emission pattern

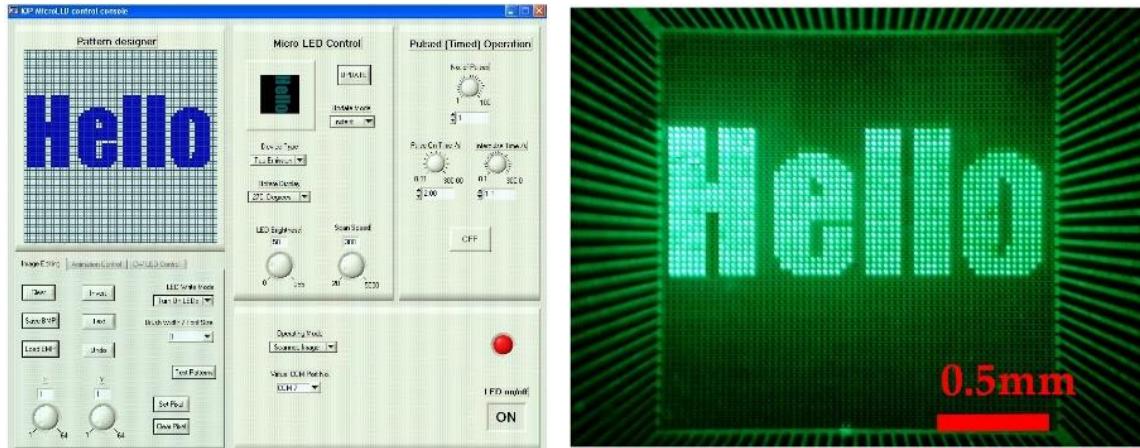


A. Mackintosh *et al.*, J. Phys. D,
Vol 41 (2009)



- Planar LED emission intensity follows a Lambertian pattern:
 - Reduces to 50% at 60° from the normal
 - Defined by total internal reflection
- Profile can be changed by shaping die (parabolic LEDs) or optics such as micro-lens arrays

GaN micro-LED arrays



- Typical off-the-shelf LED dies on the order of a few hundred μm to a mm per side
- “Mini-LEDs” (50 to 200 μm) or “micro-LEDs” ($< 50 \mu\text{m}$) are far smaller
 - *In a similar area micro-LED arrays have hundreds or thousands of individual pixels*
- Typically fabricated on standard MQW GaN LED wafers on *c*-plane sapphire
 - GaN-on-Si substrates have also been used
- Photolithography defines elements. Dimensions typically 1-100 μm per pixel
- Typical emission ranges from **near-UV** (370 nm) to **green** (520 nm)
- mW-range output power per pixel is typical
- Individually-addressable or matrix-addressable

Addressing schemes: Matrix

Matrix-addressing scheme

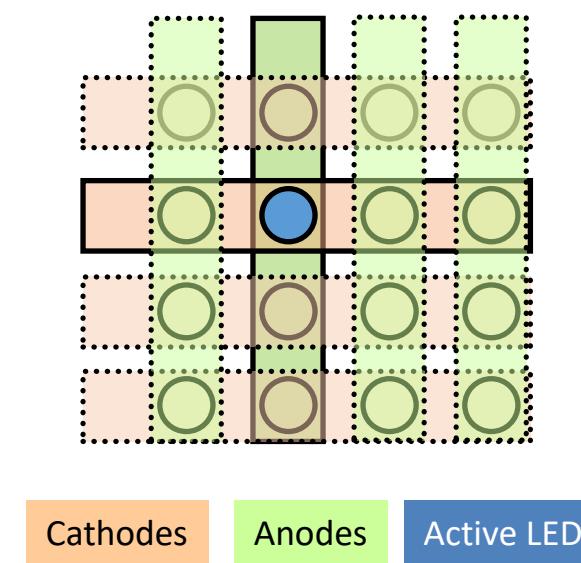
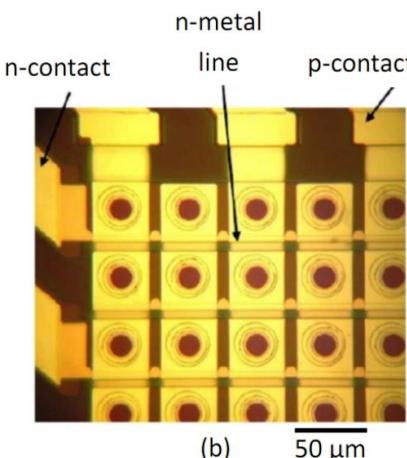
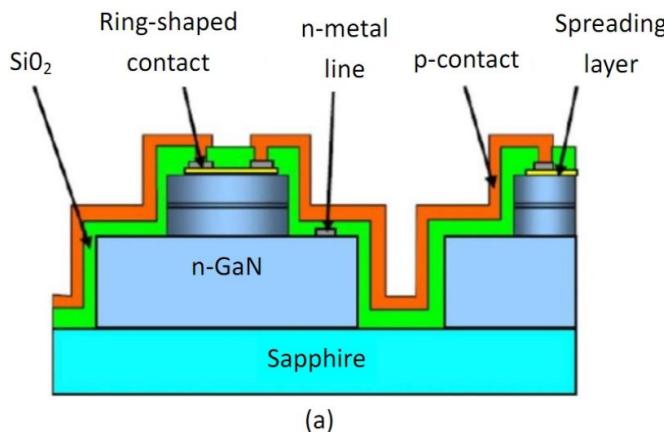
- Pixels in each column/row share a common anode/cathode
- Individual pixels are addressed by biasing the appropriate row & column
 - Passive Matrix – pixels only active when directly biased. Raster scanning required.
 - Active Matrix – transistor/capacitor holds the ON state of each pixel

Advantages

- Simpler bond-out:
 - $m + n$ connections to drive $m \times n$ pixels

Disadvantages

- Requires deep-etch into n-GaN to isolate cathodes
- Addressing scheme may not be suitable for very high frame rates or brightness



Addressing schemes: Individual

Individual-addressing scheme

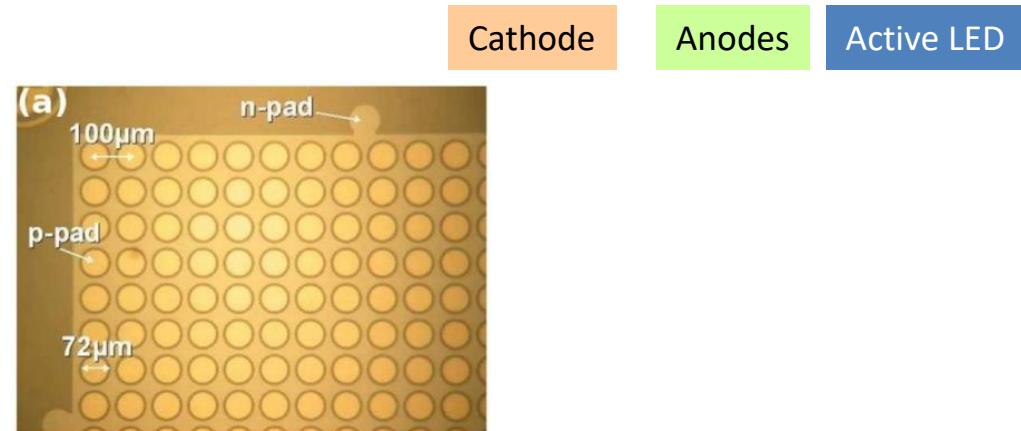
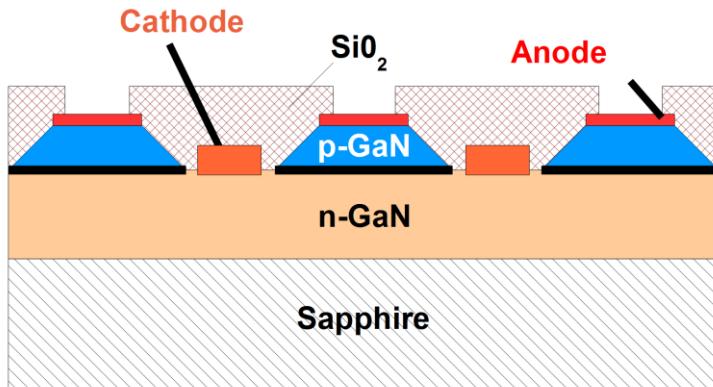
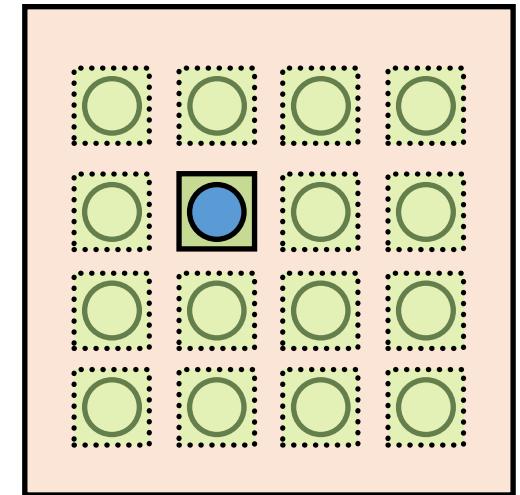
- Shared cathode (n-GaN), individual anodes (p-GaN)
- Individual pixels addressed by individual column

Advantages

- Individual control over each pixel
- Fastest frame rates – update each pixel in parallel
- Simpler fabrication (no deep etch)

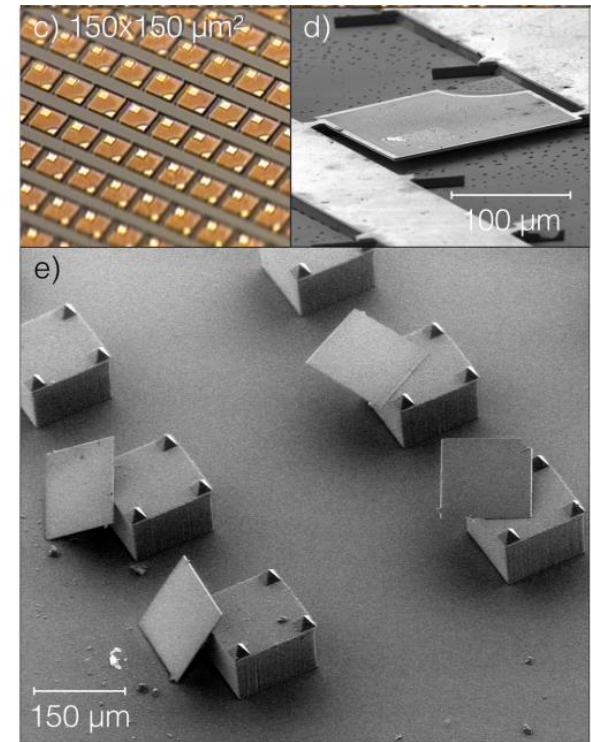
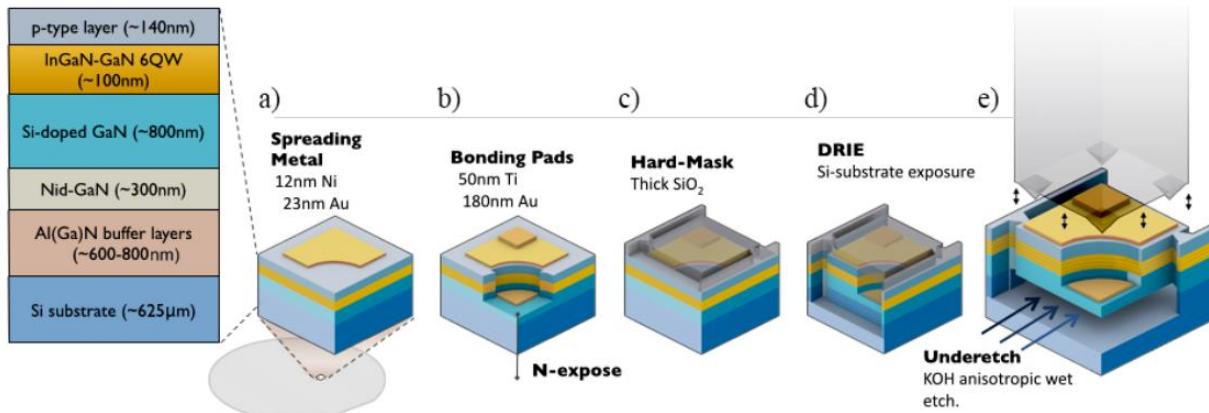
Disadvantages

- More bonds required
- Individual driver required for each LED



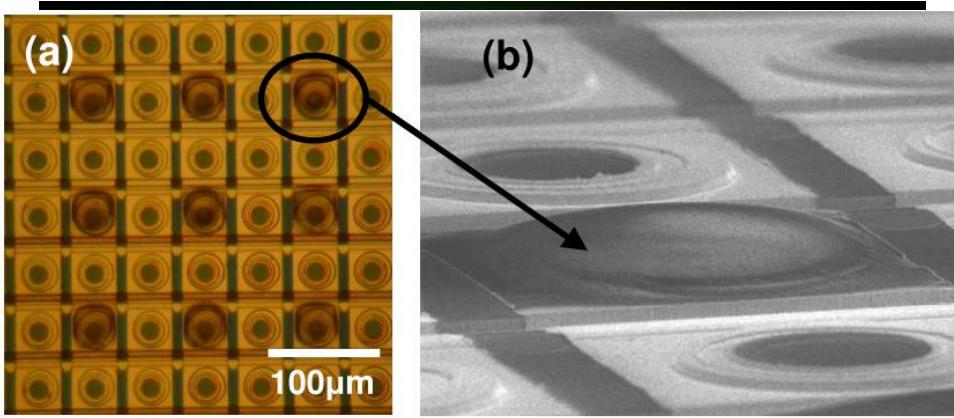
Multi-colour micro-LEDs

- A micro-LED array fabricated from a “normal” single wafer will be monochrome – every pixel emits the same colour
- How do we fabricate a multi-colour display? Broadly speaking, there are three approaches:
 - **Mechanical assembly from multiple wafers**
 - Colour-conversion
 - Monolithic growth



Multi-colour micro-LEDs (2)

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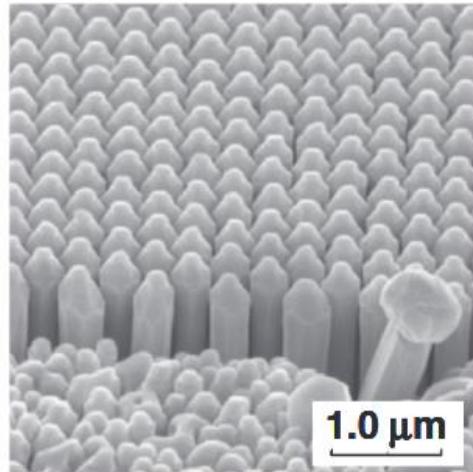
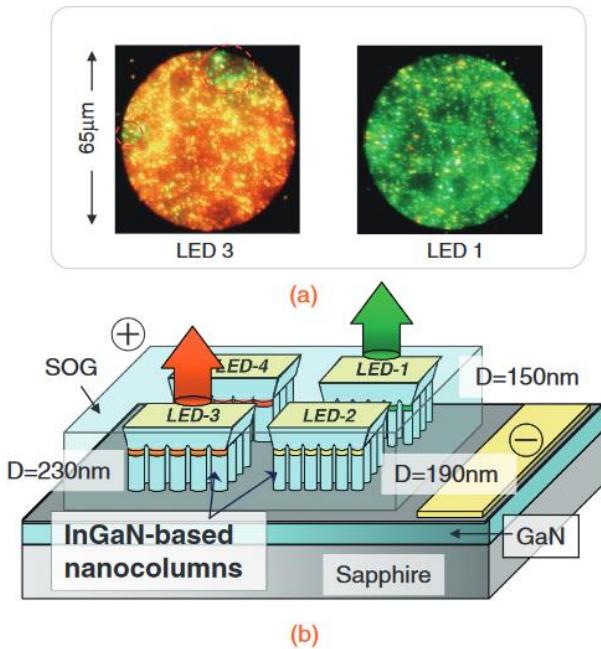


M. Wu *et al.*, Optics Express,
Vol. 17, No. 16, 16486 (2009).
Image from www.sigmadralich.com

- Solution-processable materials such as Quantum Dots or Light-Emitting Polymers
- Deposition onto selected pixels by e.g. ink-jet printing
- Short-wavelength Micro-LED emission is down-converted to longer wavelengths
- This approach is typically used in white-emitting LED lightbulbs

Multi-colour micro-LEDs (3)

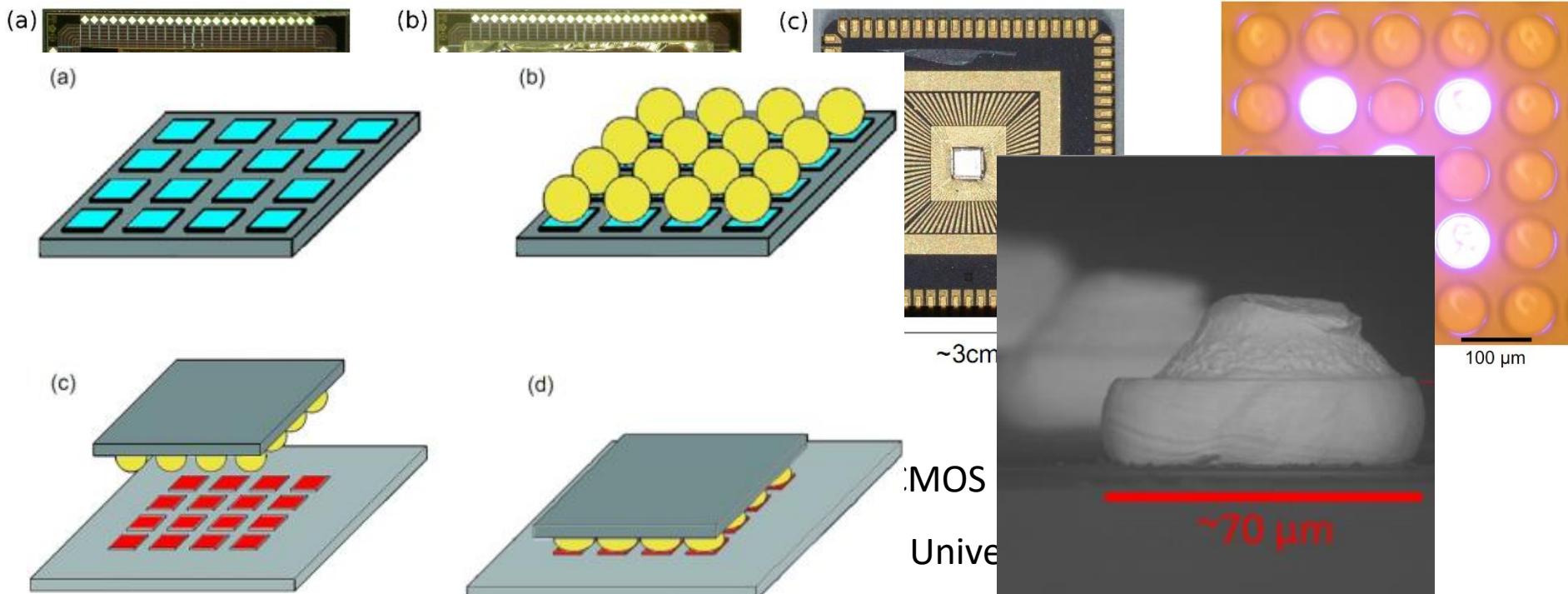
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- How do we fabricate a multi-colour display? Broadly speaking, there are three approaches:
 - Mechanical assembly from multiple wafers
 - Colour-conversion
 - **Monolithic growth**



- Novel epitaxial material aims to allow multi-colour/white LED material using “exotic” approaches such as:
 - Nano-columns
 - Doping with rare-earth materials

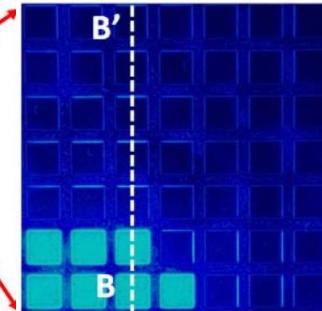
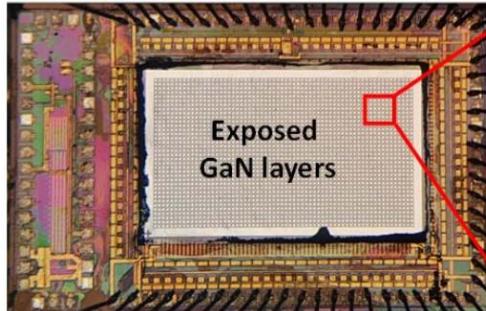
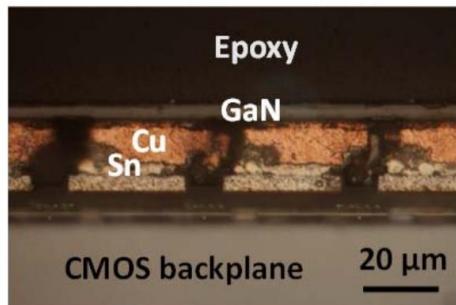
K. Kishino *et al.*, Applied Physics Express, Vol 6 (2013)

μ LED/CMOS integration



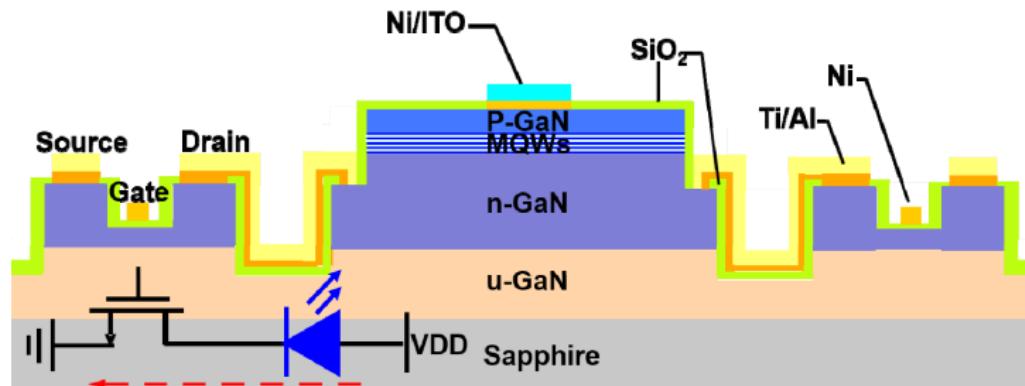
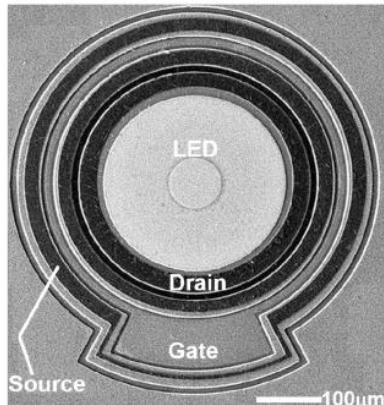
- Fabricated using standard low-voltage 0.35 μm CMOS process
- Optimised for generation of intense (high peak current) ns optical pulses
- Individual μ LEDs bump-bonded to individually-controllable CMOS drivers
- Computer control of μ LED array pixel and pattern outputs

μ LED/CMOS integration (2)



Flip-chip bonding of GaN-on-Si micro-LEDs to CMOS

- Zhang *et al.*, IEEE Phot. Tech. Letters, **31**, p865 (2019)



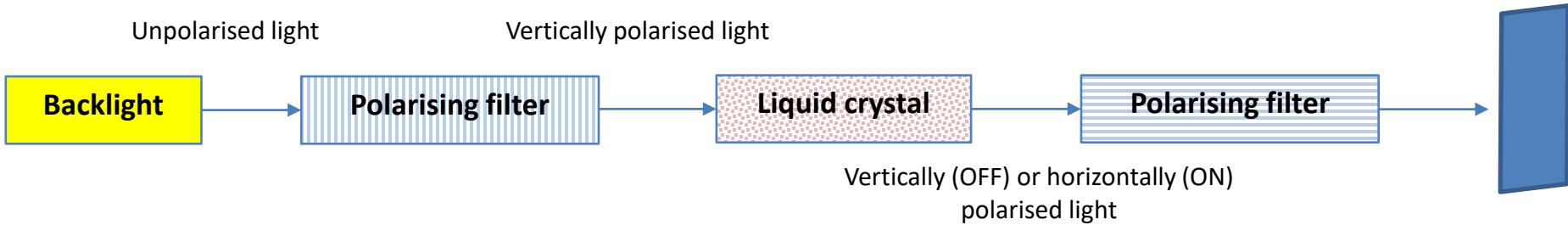
Monolithic integration of GaN micro-LEDs and MOSFET driver

- Low fill-factor
- Lee *et al.*, Optics Express, **22**, pA1589 (2019)

Applications

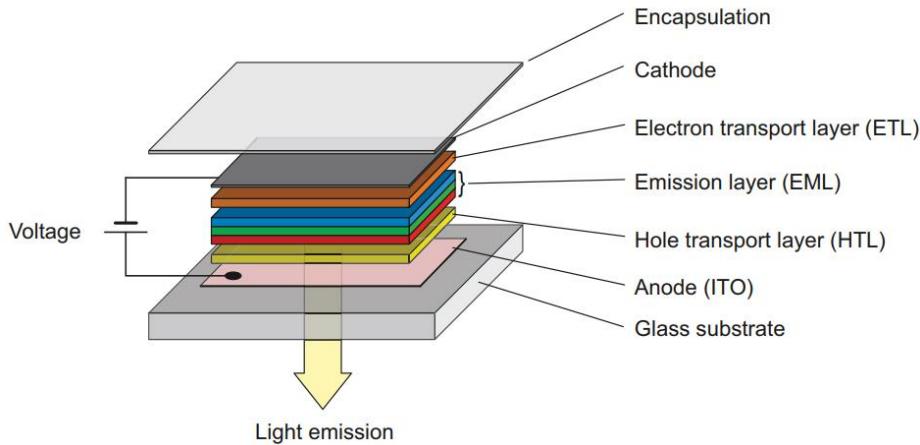
- Displays
- Visible light communications:
 - “Li-Fi”
 - Low light level communications
- Structured illumination
 - Navigation using light patterns
 - Camera-based communications
- Fluorescence sensing
- Optogenetics
- Opto-electronic trapping and mask-free photolithography

Displays – LCD



- Mature display technology
- **Advantages:**
 - Efficient and compact displays compared to old CRT technology
 - Scalable technology
 - No “burn-in”
- **Disadvantages:**
 - Inefficient
 - Narrower viewing angle
 - Low brightness and contrast
 - Slow response time of LQ (10s of ms)

Displays – OLED



- Light-emitting polymers/molecules
- Advantages:
 - High contrast
 - Fast pixel response (< 0.1 ms)
 - Higher efficiency
 - Flat & thin (< 1 μm)
 - Compatible with flexible and arbitrarily-shaped surfaces
- Disadvantages:
 - Pixel degradation
 - Limited brightness
 - Risk of “burn-in”

<https://pulsenews.co.kr/view.php?year=2017&no=852666>

Displays – Micro-LED

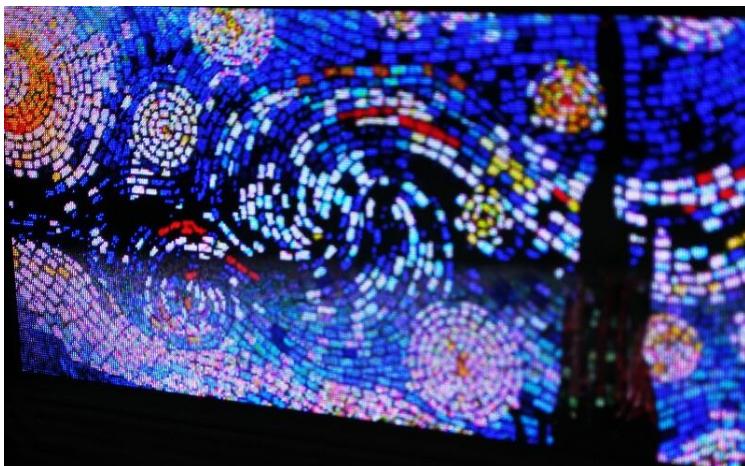


- Samsung revealed Micro-LED displays at 2019 CES
- 75" 4k resolution display and 219" “The Wall” display built with micro-LED modules
- **Advantages:**
 - Ideal contrast (directly emissive pixels)
 - High brightness and efficiency
 - Long lifetime (>100k hours) with no degradation or “burn-in”
- **Disadvantages:**
 - Very high cost compared to incumbent technologies
 - More challenging fabrication

Micro-LED micro-displays



<http://www.plesseysemiconductors.com>



<https://x-celeprint.com/news>

Inorganic Micro-LEDs can address shortcomings of existing VR/AR technology:

- Size & weight
- Power consumption
- Resolution
- Brightness & contrast

Plessey Semiconductors

- GaN-on-Si micro-LED array bonded to CMOS display driver
- 1920×1080 monochrome display, 8 µm pixels, 0.7" diagonal display

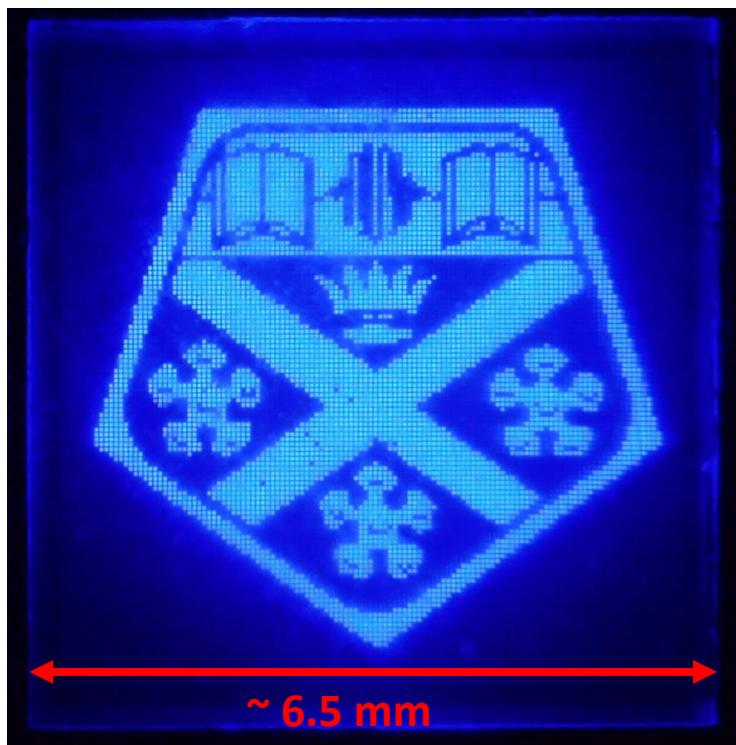
X-Celeprint

- Transfer-printed full-colour display
- 5.1", 70 ppi

High-frame rate micro-LED display



“MegaProjector”



Resolution

- 128×128 resolution
- Pixel area: $30\times30\ \mu\text{m}^2$
- Pixel pitch: 50 μm

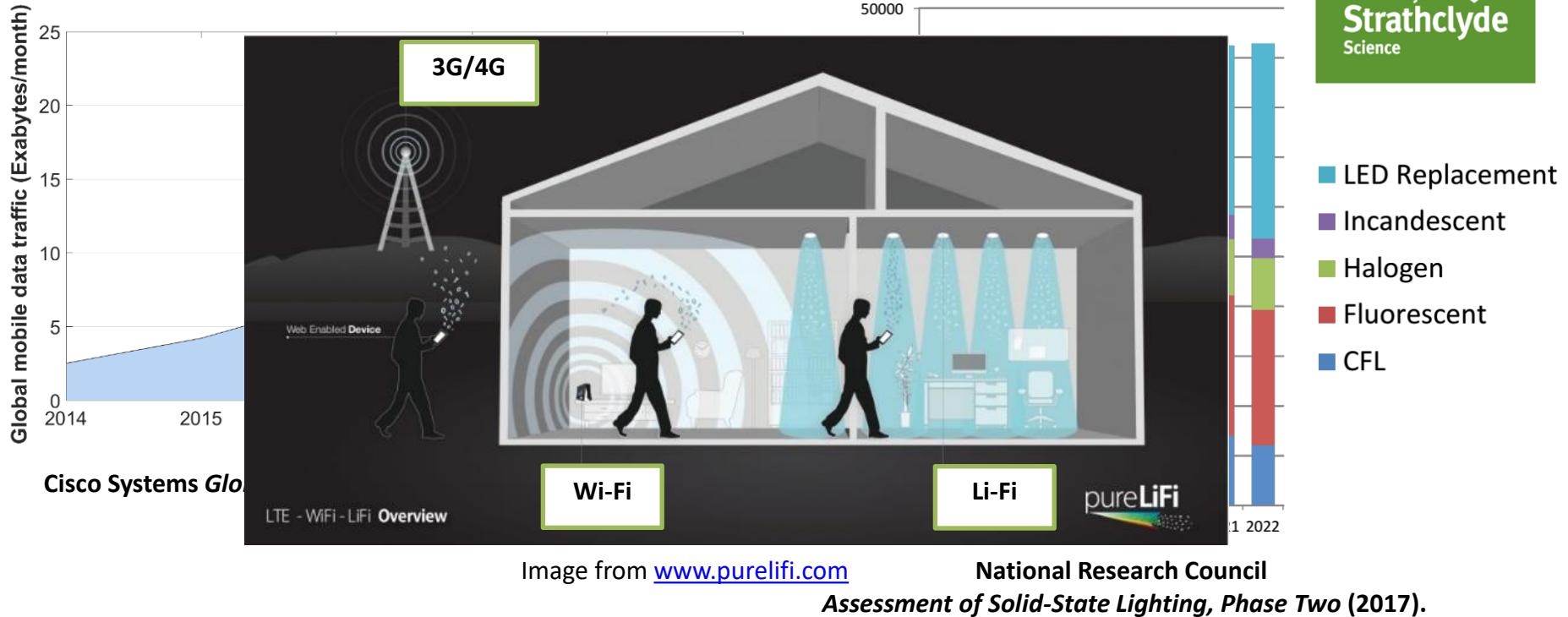
Output

- Up to 0.5 Million fps
- Peak emission: **450 nm** (available now). **405** and **510** nm should be available by end of summer 2022.
- Grayscale brightness control: 32 levels (5 bit)
- Optical output power per pixel: $\sim25\ \mu\text{W}$ @ 450 nm
- Display brightness: $2.8\times10^4\ \text{cd}/\text{m}^2$

Modes of operation

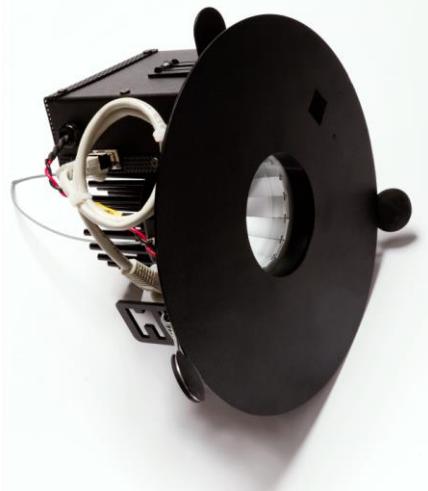
- Global shutter, rolling shutter, nanosecond pulsed
- Pulsed operation: 4 ns min. pulse duration, 0.08 pJ (single pixel), max pulse repetition rate: 100 MHz

“Li-Fi”



- Rapid growth in wireless data traffic projected to outstrip improvements in existing RF tech
- Improved efficiency and cost of LED “retrofit” units is driving rapid growth of installed LED fixtures
- Light Fidelity, “Li-Fi”, a complete bi-directional wireless network system, analogous to Wi-Fi
- Opportunity for GaN LEDs to complement existing technologies:
 - High modulation bandwidth (MHz) compared to incandescent/fluorescent sources
 - Licence-free bandwidth in the visible spectrum

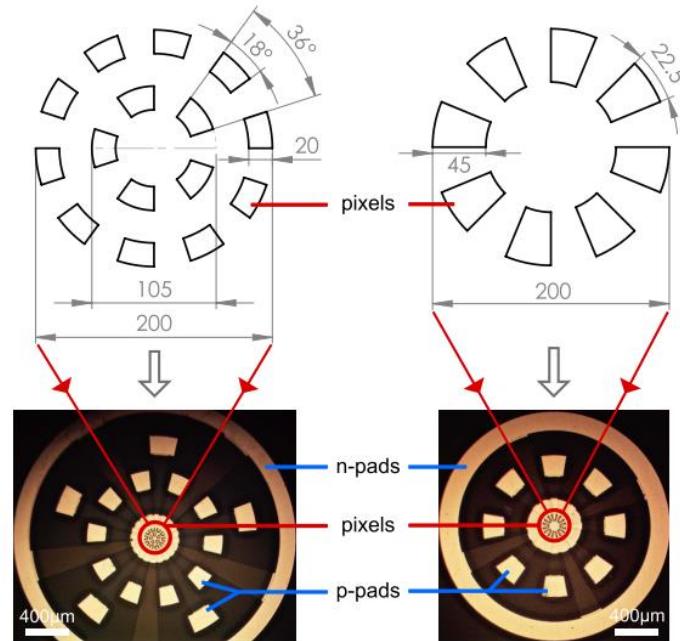
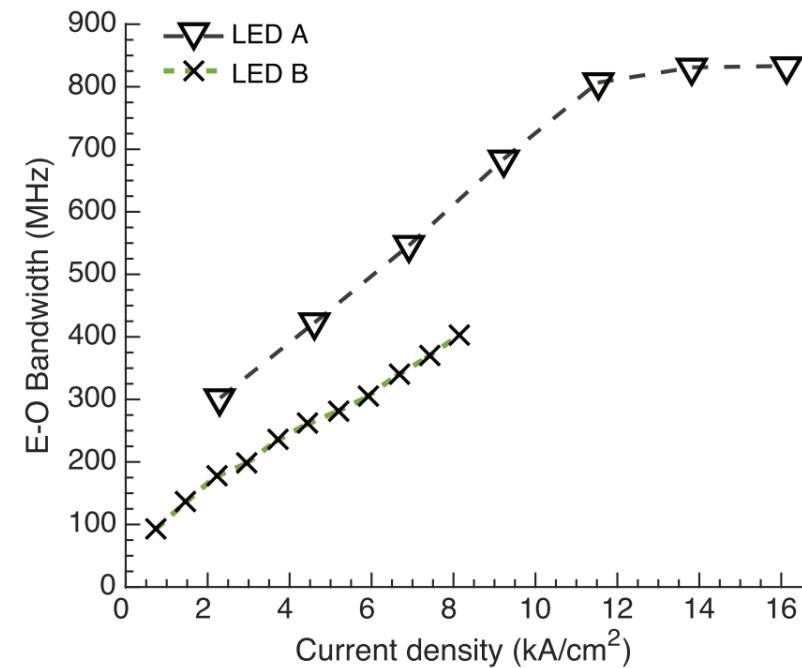
Commercial Li-Fi



All images copyright PureLiFi
www.purelifi.com

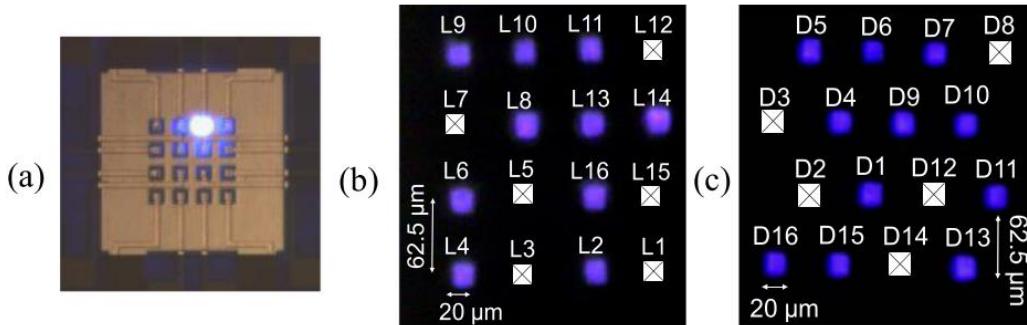
- PureLiFi, OLEDComms, Lucibel, Sygnify (Philips Lighting), Linmore & others
- Li-Fi enabled battens and downlights. Lighting retrofit.
- Multiple user support, Bi-Directional, 45 Mb/s + downlink
- Early adoption by those wanting secure wireless (e.g. banking, government, healthcare, defence)
- Candidate technology for 5G networks

Micro-LEDs for VLC



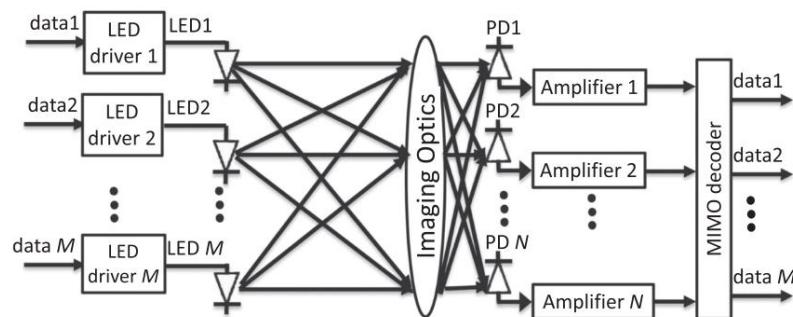
- Existing Li-Fi data rates limited by the typical bandwidth of LEDs ($\approx 10\text{-}20 \text{ MHz}$)
- Bandwidth of micro-LEDs in excess of **800 MHz** – micro-pixellation delivers higher bandwidths.
- Performance limited by carrier lifetime, τ , rather than capacitance.
- Optical data transmission at rates $>5 \text{ Gb/s per pixel}$

Micro-LEDs for VLC (2)



Bamiedakis *et al.*, Journal of Lightwave Tech., Vol 37 (13), p3305, 2019.

- Electrical interconnects face issues of EMI and high power consumption
- Micro-LED arrays can be matched to 2D polymer waveguides for “board to board” or “chip to chip” *optical* interconnects
- 2.5 Gb/s per channel (0.5 Tb/s/mm² data density)

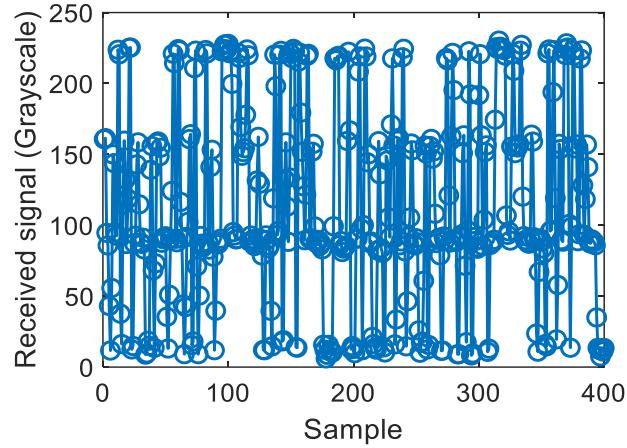
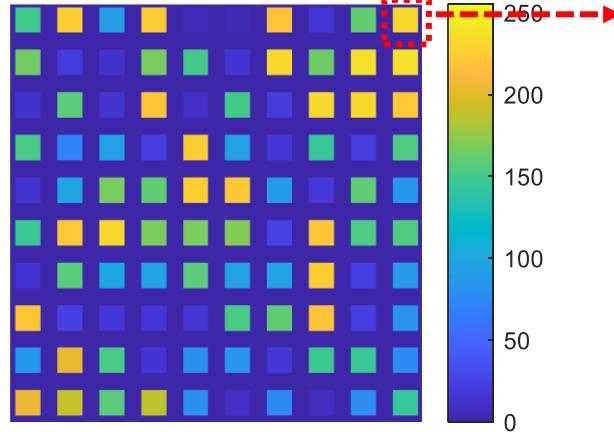
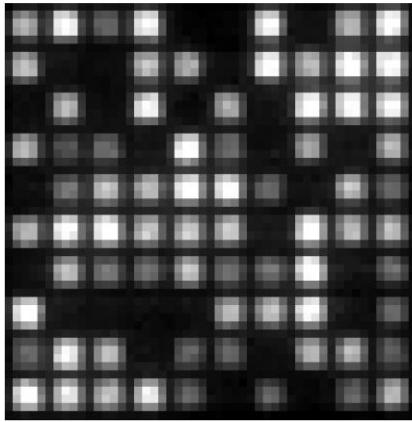


Rajbhandari *et al.*, Semiconductor Sci. Tech., Vol 32, p023001, 2017.

Rajbhandari *et al.*, Journal of Lightwave Tech., Vol 35, p4358, 2017.

- Increased data throughput using MIMO for parallel data transmission
- If the channel-to-channel crosstalk is characterised, the signal at each receiver can be recovered.
- 7.48 Gb/s obtained using a 9-channel micro-LED MIMO system

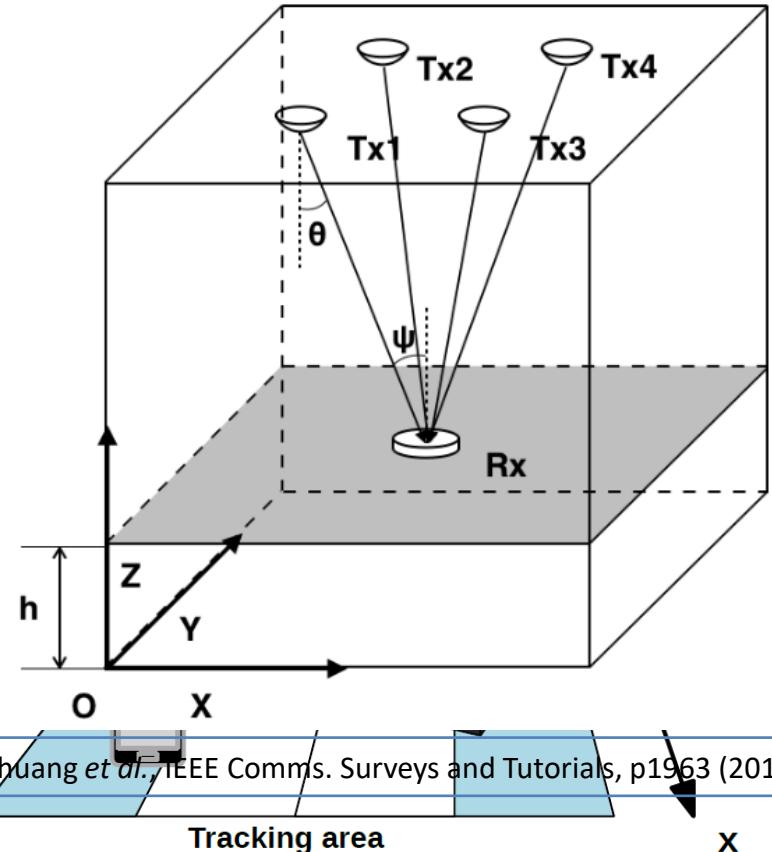
MegaProjector OCC



- Megaprojector encodes data in the state of each pixel in the array during each transmitted frame
 - $x \times y$ pixels = $x \times y$ symbols/frame
- Each pixel can encode m bits/symbol, using 2^m brightness levels
- Scaling to full Megaprojector capability = $x \times y \times m$ bits/frame = 81,920 bits/frame
- This would yield nearly 40 Mb/s using a 960 fps Smartphone camera
- Early demonstration of **101.2 Mb/s** ($128 \times 13 \times 2 \times 40\text{fps} \times 76\%$ pixel yield)

Navigation using LEDs

- GPS not suitable for indoor applications
 - Accuracy of a few m not always practical
 - GPS signals don't reliably penetrate into buildings
- LED lighting infrastructure can be used as “beacons” for navigating
 - E.g. triangulate position from Transmitters (with known positions) by measuring received signal strengths.
- However, this require processing effort at the Rx
 - Not necessarily suitable for low-power “Internet of Things” devices
- Alternative approach – use patterns from micro-LED arrays to encode spatial information.
 - Moves the complexity from the Rx to the Tx

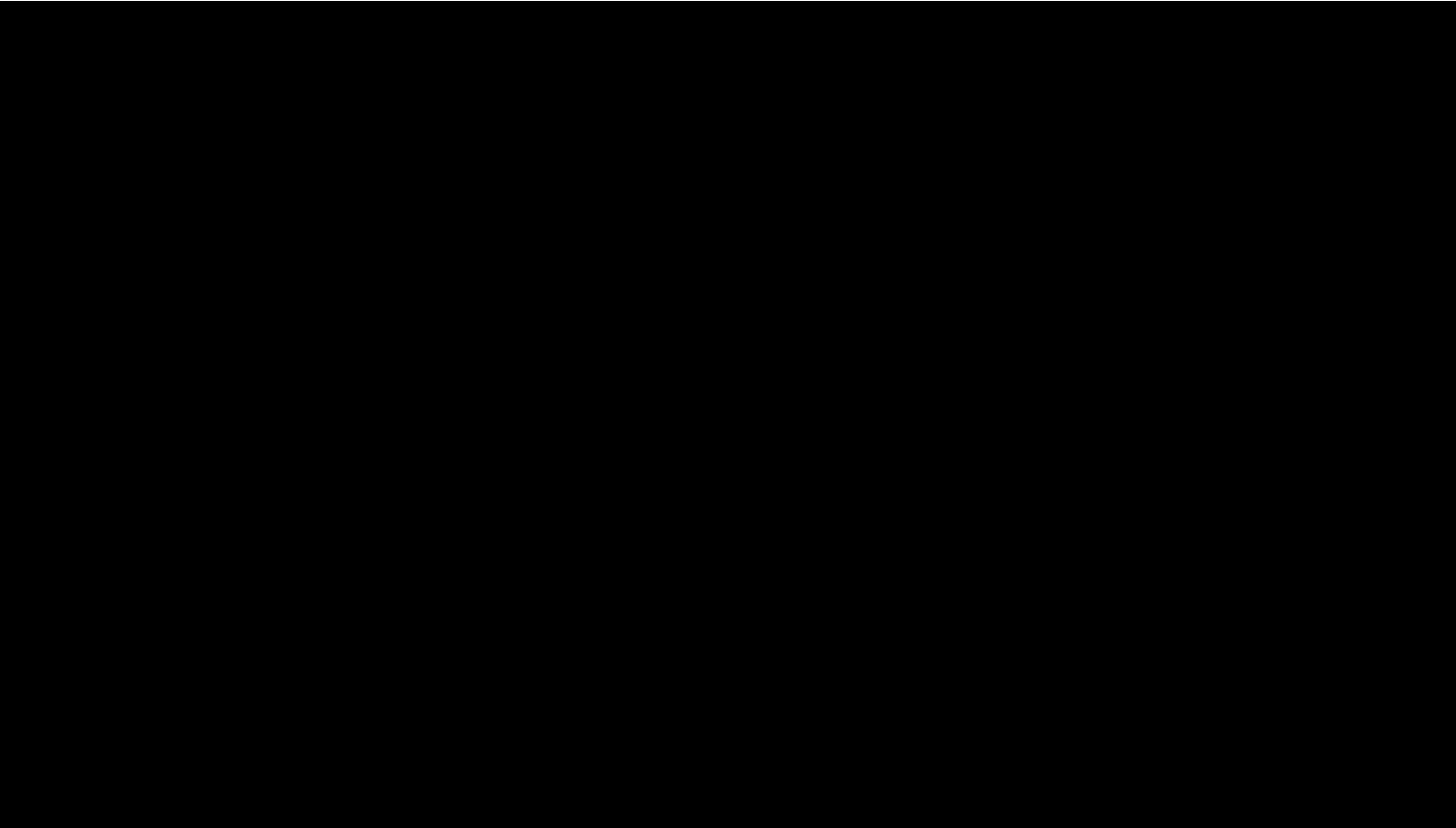


Zhuang et al., IEEE Comms. Surveys and Tutorials, p1963 (2018)

Tracking area

X

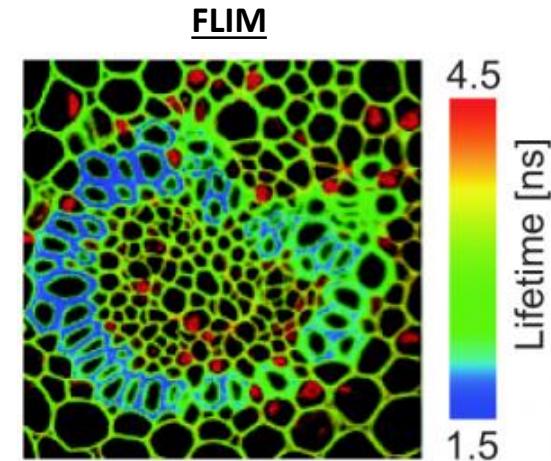
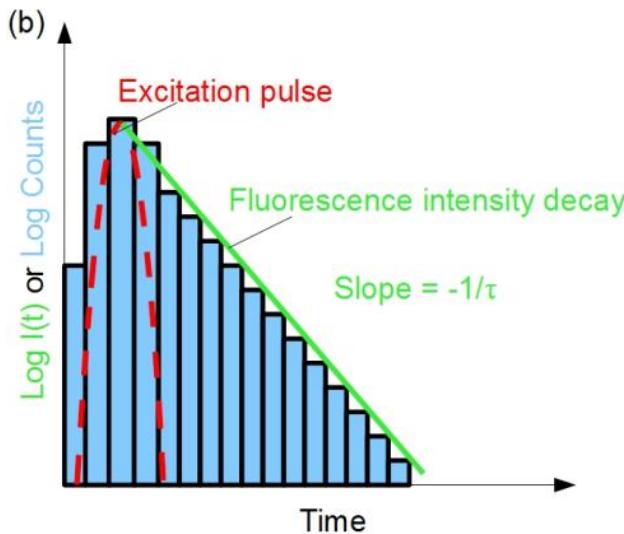
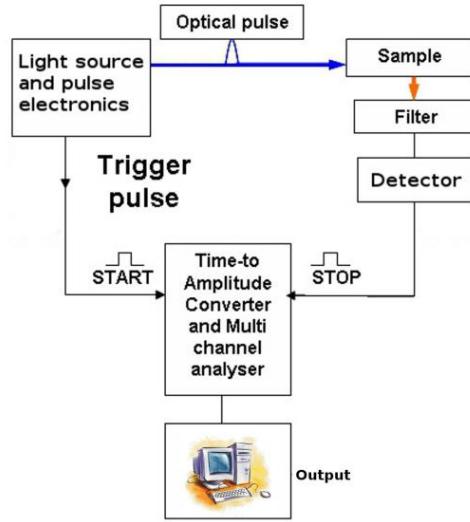
Navigation using LEDs (3)



- Position update rate 6 Hz
 - Limited by ADC (Arduino Uno) sampling rate
 - 100 Hz with oscilloscope & offline processing
- On-line decoding by micro-processor
- Possible application in cubesat-to-cubesat comms.

Herrnsdorf *et al.*, Journal of Lightwave Tech., Vol 35 (12), p2339, (2019).

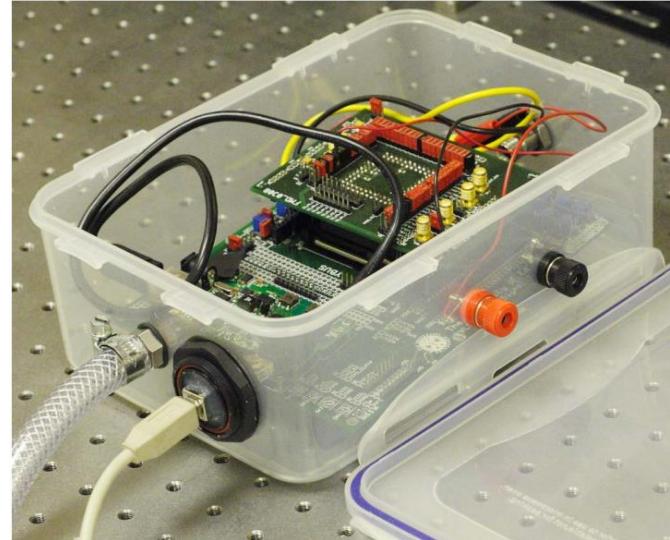
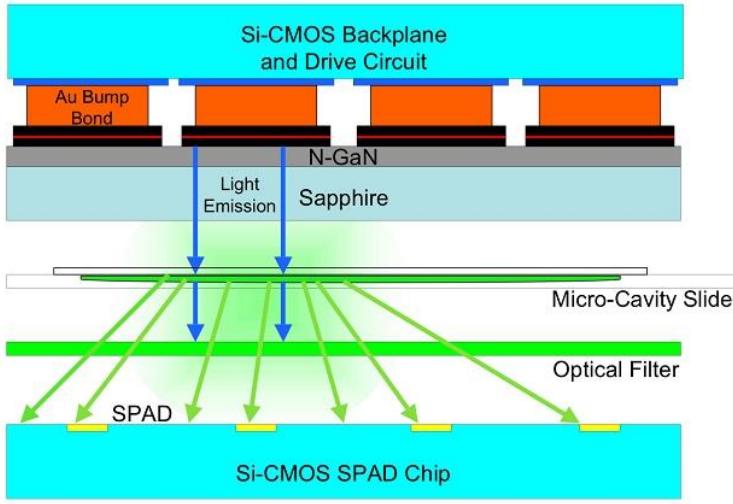
Fluorescence lifetime measurements



<https://www.picoquant.com/applications/category/life-science/fluorescence-lifetime-imaging-flim>

- Fluorophore optically excited
- Energy released as fluorescence by molecules after a random time delay, but with a characteristic average “lifetime”, τ
- τ not affected by concentration, absorption or excitation intensity
 - Enhanced contrast in microscopy (FLIM)
- τ can be affected by other environmental factors (temperature, pH, viscosity...)

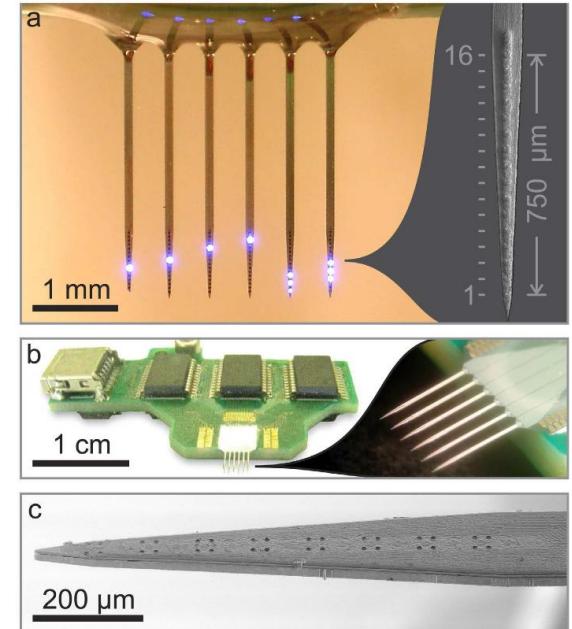
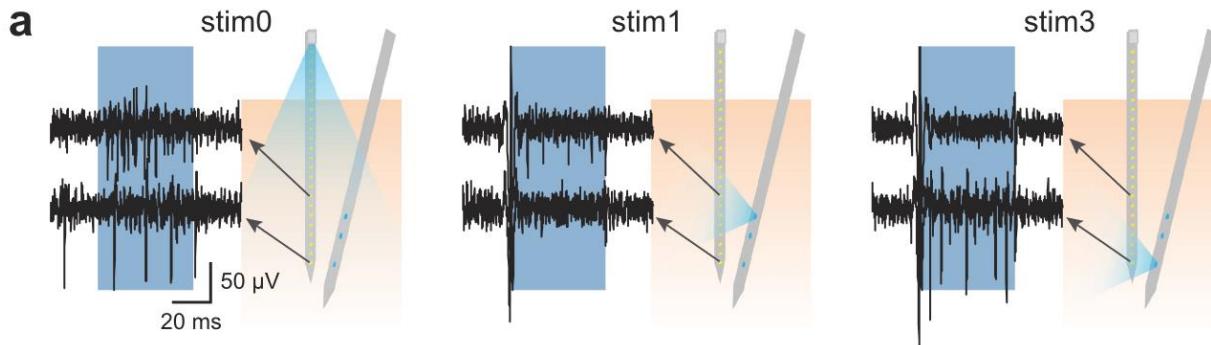
Compact explosive vapour sensor



- Light-emitting polymer excited by pulsed micro-LEDs
- Fluorescence lifetime measured using SPAD array
- Vapour flowed through airtight container containing the sensor
- Polymer lifetime decreases when vapour binds to polymer
- Sensitivity of 10 ppb

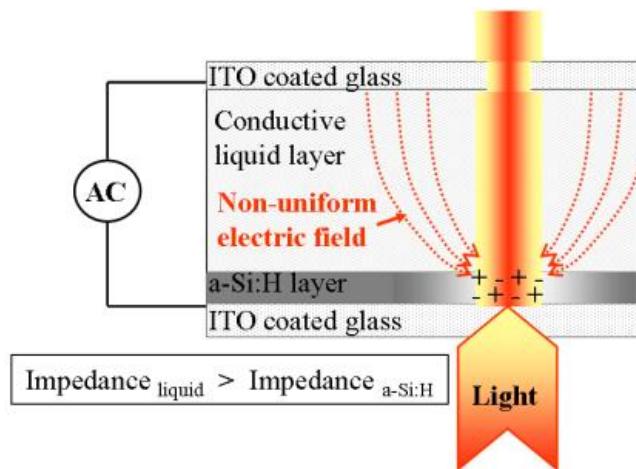
Optogenetics

- Optogenetics is a technique that allows light to control, and study, the behaviour of cells
 - e.g. light to activate or suppress neurons
- Initial method used an optical fibre to optically excite a volume of tissue from the surface (*stim0*)
 - Imprecise – all neurons within a volume are excited, can't target specific layers
- Using an array of micro-LEDs along a needle-like shank, specific layers within the brain can be targeted (*stim1*, *stim3*)
- Electrodes on shank record electrical activity

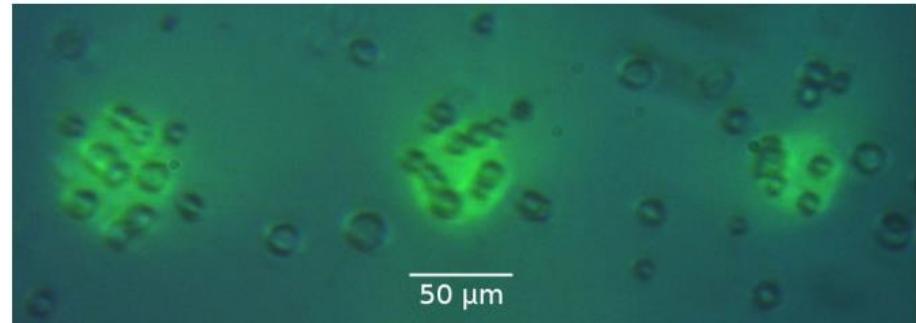


Scharf *et al.*, Scientific Reports, Vol 6, p1, June 2016

Other applications

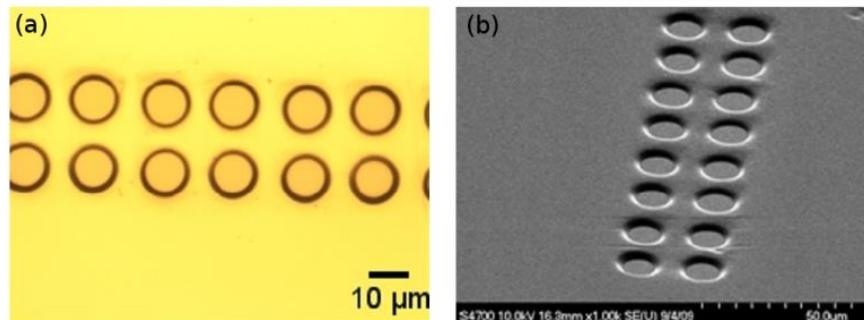


A. Zarowna-Dabrowska *et al.*,
Optics Express, 19 (2011)



Opto-electronic trapping

- Localised electrical field created where photoconductive layer is illuminated
- Compact portable cell-trapping system using a Micro-LED display



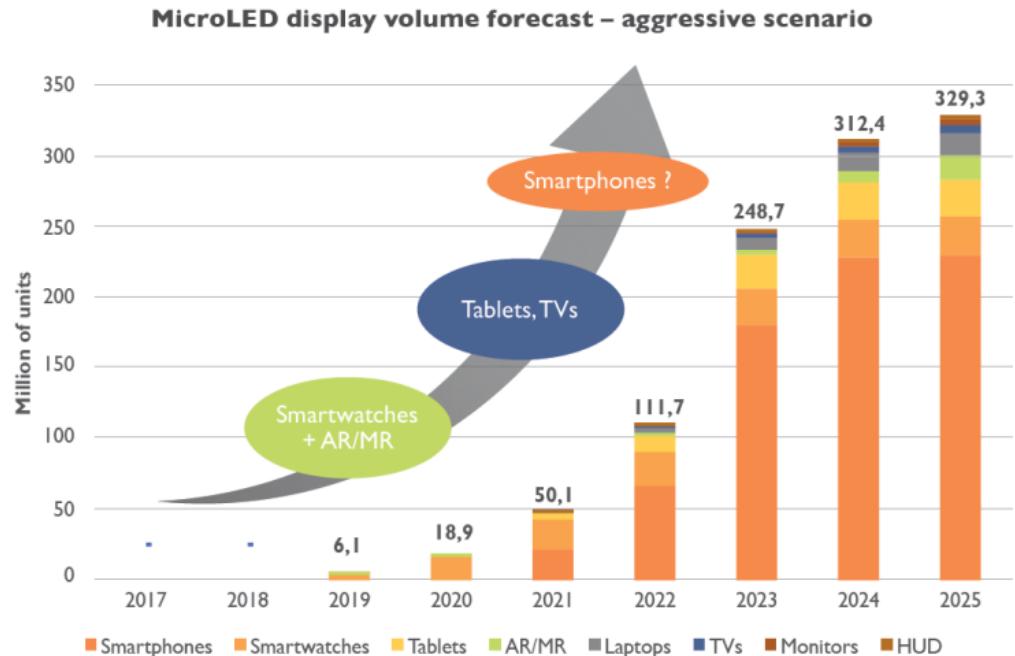
D. Elfström *et al.*, *Optics Express*, 17 (2009)

Mask-free photolithography

- Photoresist exposed by UV micro-LEDs
- Patterns can be created without the need for hard photolith masks

Summary and future prospects

- Micro-LED technology is drawing an increasing amount of commercial interest:
 - \$100 million raised by startups in 2019
 - Estimated \$1.5 to \$2 billion invested by Apple so far
 - Samsung, Oculus (Facebook), LG, Kyocera, Sharp...
- Driven by display market
- Significant roadblocks remain in terms of small die efficiency, transfer and manufacturability. Not yet competitive with OLED displays



Yole Development, report:
“MicroLEDs: status and reality check” (2019)

As we have demonstrated, there are many applications beyond displays for micro-LEDs which should benefit in future from the development of commercial micro-LED displays

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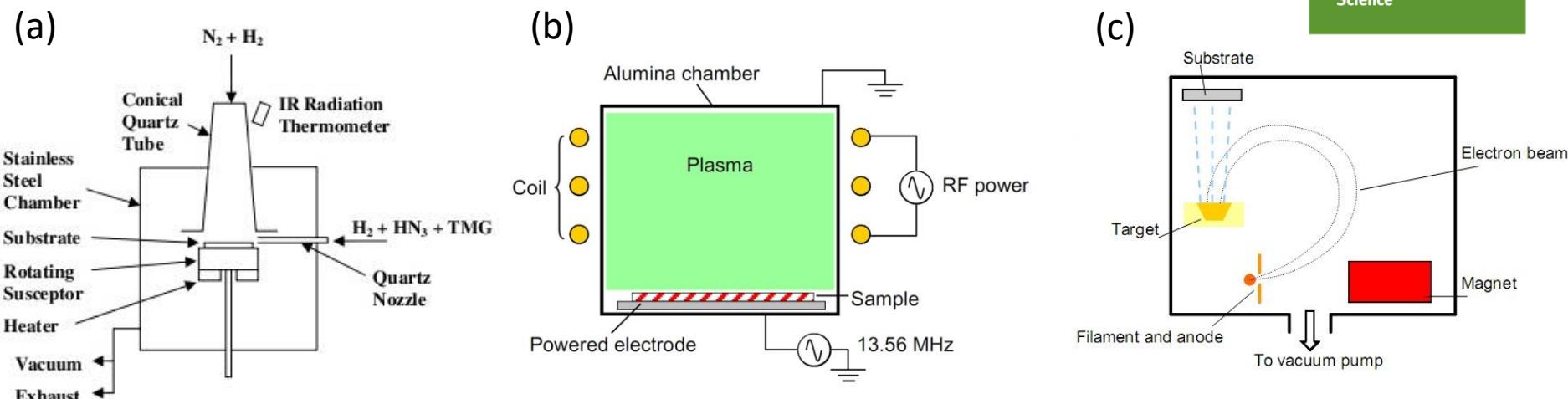
...and many others!

Thank you for your attention



University of
Strathclyde
Glasgow

Epitaxial growth and processing



(a) Epitaxial growth by Metal Organic Chemical Vapour Deposition (MOCVD)

- Material in gas phase deposited on substrate by chemical reaction
- Substrate heated to very high temperatures (as much as 1000°C)
- $0.5 \mu\text{m}/\text{hour}$ growth rates

(b) Etching by Inductively-Coupled Plasma (ICP) reactor

- Ions accelerated towards substrate to etch
- $\approx 1 \mu\text{m}/\text{minute}$ etch rates

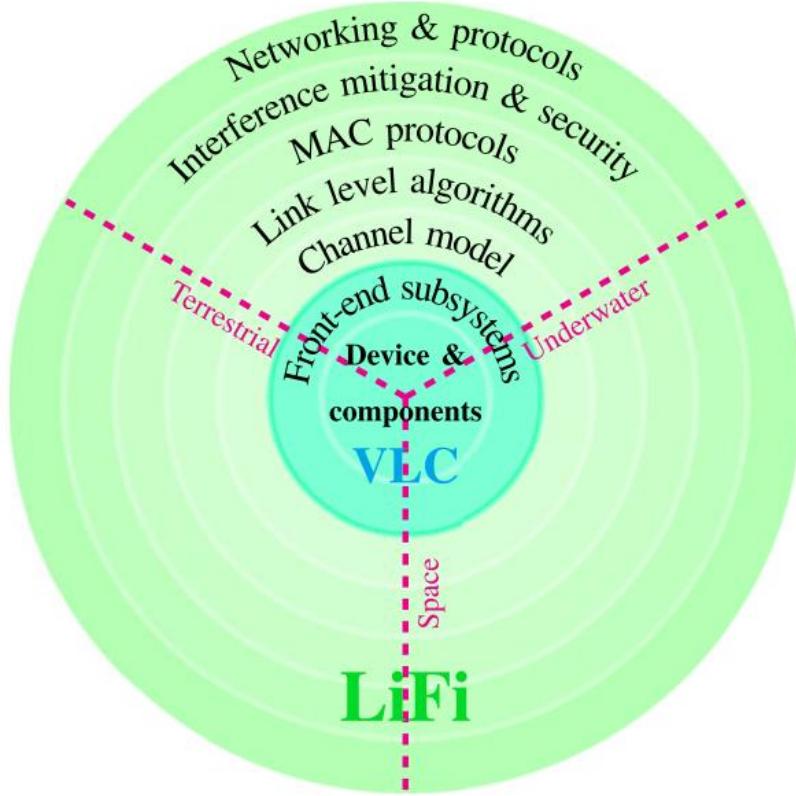
(c) Metal deposition by Electron-Beam Evaporation

- E-Beam heats target (e.g. Au) to evaporate it
- Evaporated material condenses on the substrate

Not an
exhaustive
list!

Photolithography used to define areas affected by etching and deposition

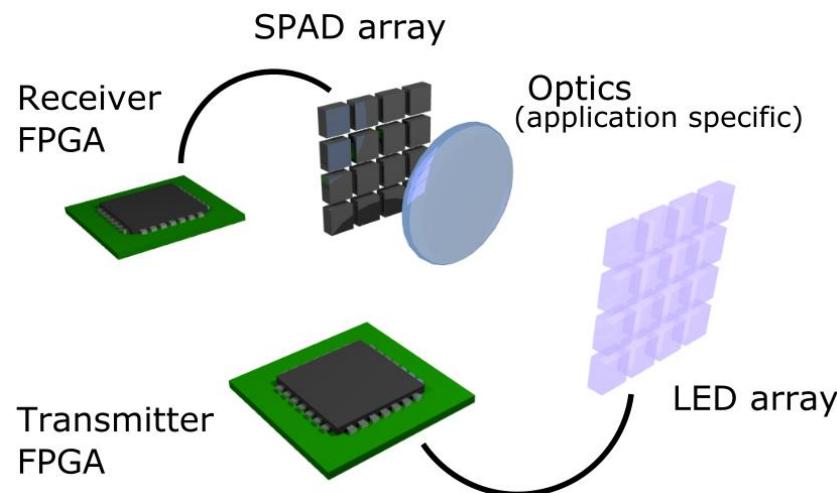
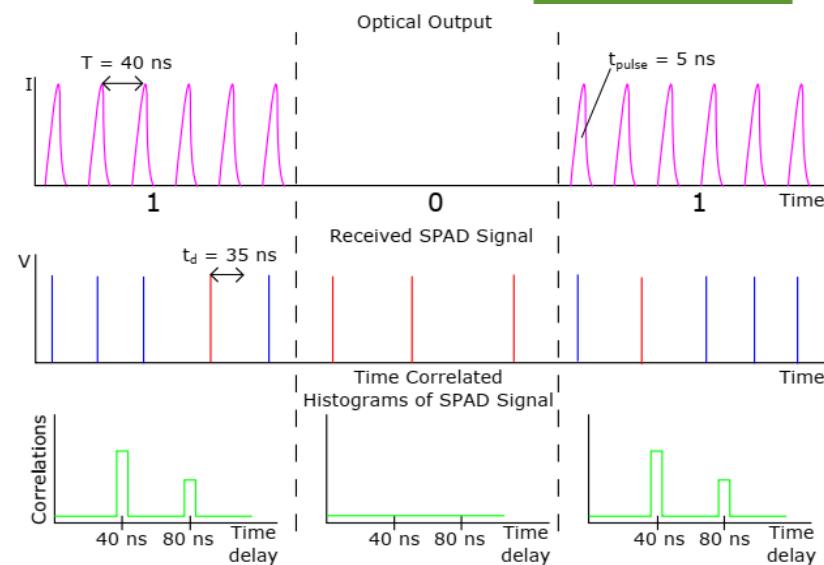
Visible Light Communications



- **Visible Light Communication** uses visible light sources (e.g. LEDs or lasers) to transmit data by intensity modulation
- Applicable to free-space, polymer waveguides, and underwater wireless
- **VLC** generally only includes the devices & component frontend
- On the other hand, “**Li-Fi**” encompasses a complete bi-directional wireless network system with multiple access

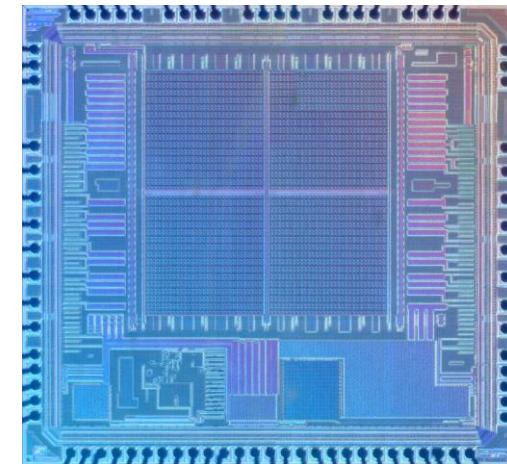
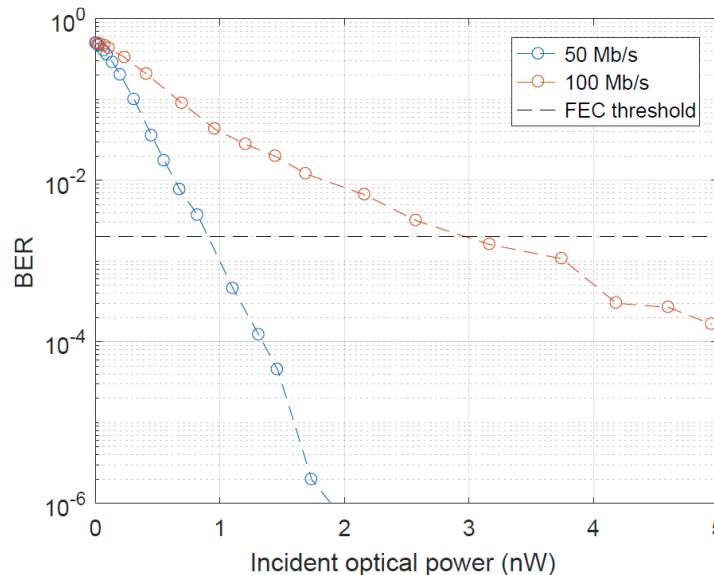
Low light level comms

- Short optical pulses from micro-LEDs used to transmit data
- Low SWAP systems
 - GaN LEDs, Si SPADs
- Funding from EPSRC
 - Glasgow ‘QuantIC’ Quantum Hub
 - Collaboration with Scottish Centre for Excellence in Satellite Applications, Clyde Space and Scottish Microelectronics Centre



Data Rates

- 2 kb/s – 100 Mb/s depending on:
 - Hardware
 - Received power
 - Background noise conditions
- 100 Mb/s @ -55.2 dBm
- 50 Mb/s @ -60.5 dBm
- Up to 5 Mb/s at virtually any type of background, incl AC-modulated



- 2.6 x 2.8 mm Chip in 130nm CMOS
- 4096 SPADs
- 43% SPAD fill factor
- Digital operation
- 1 GigaPhoton/s count rate
- High-speed digital readout