An electrode design rule for high performance top-illuminated organic photovoltaics†

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Abstract

An electrode design rule for high performance top-illuminated bulk-heterojunction organic photovoltaics is proposed, that enables the device architecture to be simplified by removing the need for the electron selective layer at the interface with the low work function reflective electrode. This new guideline for electrode design is underpinned by device studies in conjunction with a study of the interfacial energetics at the interface between five widely used solution processed organic semiconductors of both electron donor and acceptor type, and a stable low work function reflective substrate electrode. The magnitude and distribution of space charge resulting from ground-state electron transfer from the electrode into each organic semiconductor upon contact formation is derived from direct measurements of the interfacial energetics using the Kelvin probe technique, which enables the variation in potential across the entire film thickness used in the devices to be probed.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that organic photovoltaics (OPVs) based on a solution processed bulk-heterojunction (BHJ) of electron donor and electron acceptor type organic semiconductors offer the lowest cost path to the fabrication of OPVs. For this type of OPV it is considered essential to include wide band gap charge extraction layers at both electrode interfaces to ensure optimised interfacial energetics and guarantee charge carrier selectivity, since both donor and acceptor type organic semiconductors can contact both electrodes. The thickness of these charge extraction layers is typically in the range 3–50 nm, sufficient to block the extraction of one carrier type whilst at the same time not significantly contributing to device series resistance or parasitic absorption of incident light. For hole-blocking layers (HBLs) the wideband gap oxides ZnO and TiO₂ are the materials of choice because they can be deposited from solvents that are orthogonal to those used for organic semiconductors and have the deep lying valance band edge needed to block unwanted hole-extraction by the electrode, a process that erodes device fill factor (FF) and short-circuit current density (Jsc). These materials are n-type with a conduction band edge at comparable energy to the lowest unoccupied molecule orbital (LUMO) in the electron-acceptor component of the BHJ, and so serve to align the electrode Fermi level to the LUMO of the organic electron-acceptor which maximises the electric field strength across the BHJ. The use of these metal oxides removes the need for a low work function reactive metal electrode such as Ca because they can be used in conjunction with relatively high work function, and thus relatively stable metals such as Ag. It has been proposed that these wide band gap interfacial layers also offer the benefit of: (i) reduced quenching of excitons formed in the

Conceptual insights

We show a new design rule for top-illuminated organic photovoltaics (OPVs) that enables the device structure to be simplified by removing one of the charge selective layers and thereby offers a path to lower fabrication cost. OPVs based on a solution processed bulk-heterojunction offer the lowest cost path to the fabrication of OPVs. For these devices it is considered essential to include charge selective layers at both electrode interfaces, since both the donor and acceptor phases of the bulk-heterojunction can contact both electrodes. In this communication we show, through a combination of device studies and a study of the energetics at the interface between five widely used solution processed organic semiconductors (of both electron donor and acceptor type) and a low work function reflective substrate electrode, that for top-illuminated OPVs the hole-blocking layer is not needed when the donor material has a narrow bandgap – a requirement that is easily met in high performance donor polymers. Additionally, to our knowledge, these are the first reported measurements of the energetics between such a low work function substrate electrode and solution processed organic semiconductors, uncomplicated by the uncontrolled chemical reaction that usually occurs at the interface with low work function electrodes.

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BHJ near to the reflective electrode, leading to improved $J_{sc}$, and (ii) increased $J_{sc}$ by acting as an optical spacer layer, which enables tuning of the optical field distribution to maximise absorption of light.

Increasingly OPVs with a top-illuminated architecture are attracting attention because they remove the need for costly conducting oxide coated glass and increase the range of potential applications by giving more flexibility in terms of the materials used as the supporting substrate. In this class of OPV the preferred location of the HBL is at the contact with the reflective substrate electrode, which has proved to be the most stable device architecture. The potential benefit of an optical spacer at the interface with the reflective electrode in top-illuminated OPVs has been explored by Lin et al. in the context of OPV devices based on very thin films of evaporated small molecule organic semiconductors. However, the thickness of the optical spacer layer needs to be very carefully controlled and this approach is only useful for a narrow range of incident angles, so is not a panacea for light management in top-illuminated OPVs.

Herein we present the results of a study of the energetics at the interface between five widely used solution processed organic semiconductors and a low work function (-3.25 eV) electrode, in conjunction with OPV device studies, and use this data to underpin a new electrode design rule for top-illuminated OPVs. To our knowledge the vast majority of published reports date relating to the study of energy level alignment at the interface between substrate electrodes and solution processed organic semiconductors have been limited to relatively high work function (>3.8 eV) electrode materials, or electrodes capped with an HBL such as ZnO, likely due to the difficulty of working with low work function metals outside of a vacuum system. We have recently reported a means of rendering Al films sufficiently stable towards oxidation for practical application as a substrate electrode in top-illuminated OPVs, using a very thin capping layer of Cu and Al. This triple layer metal electrode is well-matched to the requirements of top-illuminated OPVs because it offers the advantages of high reflectivity, low metal cost, and the rare combination of high stability towards oxidation and a very low work function; 3.25 eV ± 0.08 eV. In the current study we have exploited this new reflective electrode, which presents an opportunity to investigate the energetics at the interface between a low work function electrode and solution processed organic semiconductor junction without the complexity associated with interfacial chemical reaction and uncontrolled oxidation.

Evaporation of metals was carried out using a CreaPhys Organic molecular evaporator co-located in the same glovebox as the spin coater. The thickness of all vacuum deposited layers was measured using a calibrated quartz-crystal microbalance (QCM) mounted adjacent to the substrates. All metals were thermally evaporated using tungsten boats. MoO$_3$ was thermally evaporated from boron nitride crucibles. The working pressure of the system was ≤1 x 10$^{-5}$ mbar. To fabricate the reflective electrodes onto cleaned 12 x 12 mm$^2$ glass slides was thermally evaporated Al (60–100 nm, 1 nm s$^{-1}$), Cu (8 nm, 0.1 nm s$^{-1}$), Al (0.8 nm, 0.01–0.03 nm s$^{-1}$) without breaking the vacuum between depositions followed by oxidation in dry air for 1 hour, as previously reported, to ensure oxidation of the thin capping layer.

Experimental

Glass substrates were thoroughly cleaned using a four stage process with ultra-sonic agitation in: (i) deionised water/surfactant (Decon, Neutracon) solution; (ii) deionised water; (iii) isopropanol; (iv) and finally acetone vapour, followed by blow drying with nitrogen. Substrates were then UV/O$_3$ treated to remove surface organic contaminants.

All sample fabrication and testing was carried out in a N$_2$ filled glove box with a base O$_2$ level of <3 ppm unless otherwise stated.
Results & discussion

To probe the interfacial energetics upon contact formation the Kelvin probe technique was used to measure the change in energy of the vacuum level (\(\Delta E_{\text{Vac}}\)) relative to the Fermi level (\(E_F\)), denoted as \(\Delta E_{\text{Vac}}\), upon deposition of organic semiconductor layers from solution onto Al|Cu|Al electrodes. Importantly, measurements were made under nitrogen immediately after organic semiconductor deposition without exposure to the laboratory atmosphere. Unlike ultra-violet photo-electron spectroscopy, which is widely used to make measurements of interfacial energetics, the maximum film thickness that can be probed using the Kelvin probe technique is not limited by sample charging. As a result, the change in potential across film thicknesses comparable to that used in OPV devices can be measured using an Asylum Research MFP3D. Work function measurements were performed using a Kelvin probe referenced to freshly cleaned highly oriented pyrolytic graphite in a nitrogen-filled glove box co-located with the thermal evaporator.

Differential pulse voltammetry was conducted in dichloromethane with 0.1 M tetrabutylammonium hexafluorophosphate electrolyte with \(\mu\)M concentrations of PC\(_{60}\)BM and PC\(_{70}\)BM. CH Instruments Electrochemical Analyzer was used with a platinum working electrode, a Ag/AgCl reference electrode and platinum wire as the counter electrode. HOMO and LUMO levels are calculated as shown in ESI† with the method proposed by D’Andrade et al.\(^{23}\) and Djurovich et al.\(^{24}\) respectively.

The first 10 nm of the interface. In both cases the change in the Fermi level is consistent with spontaneous transfer of electron density from the electrode into the adjacent fullerene layer, giving rise to a static space charge region near to the interface and band bending, as depicted in Fig. 1(b) and (d). For each of the measurements of interfacial energetics the space charge distribution \(\rho(x)\) that would give rise to the measured variation in potential is calculated using Poisson’s equation:

\[
\frac{d^2V(x)}{dx^2} = \frac{\rho(x)}{\varepsilon_0\varepsilon_r}
\]

where \(\varepsilon_0\) is the permittivity of free space and \(\varepsilon_r\) is the relative permittivity of each organic semiconductor, assumed to be 4 and 3 for the fullerenes electron acceptors and polymer electron donors respectively. Thermodynamic equilibrium across the interface between un-doped organic semiconductors and electrodes cannot be assumed for the semiconductor thicknesses used in OPVs because the density of unintentional impurities in the organic semiconductor capable of donating or accepting charge may be too low. However in the current case the LUMO energies of PC\(_{60}\)BM and PC\(_{70}\)BM are \(~3.77\) eV and \(~3.78\) eV below the vacuum level respectively (as measured by differential pulsed voltammetry – ESI†), which is much lower than the energy of the electrode Fermi level at \(~3.25\) eV below the vacuum level, and so there is a high density of states available to accommodate the transferred charge.

In the context of a BHJ OPV both the donor and acceptor phases can have an interface with both electrodes, and so it is interesting to consider the energetics at the contact between the donor type organic semiconductor and the low work function electrode, a class of interface that has been sparsely investigated.
to date and only in the context of vacuum deposited small molecules.\textsuperscript{26,32,33} It is evident from Fig. 2(a), (c) and (e) that the extent of electron transfer from the Al|Cu|Al electrode into the three donor type semiconductors investigated is much less than that at the interface with the fullerenes, which is consistent with the shallower LUMO states in donor type organic semiconductors.\textsuperscript{3}

For both PTB7 and PCDTBT the LUMO is below the Fermi level of the electrode at 3.3–3.5 eV\textsuperscript{34,35} and 3.4–3.6 eV\textsuperscript{36,37} below $\varepsilon^\text{vac}$ respectively, so there is a high density of empty states into which electron density can be accepted. Consequently, most of the potential energy change occurs very close to the electrode in both of these cases, just as for the fullerenes. Conversely, the rate of change in potential energy with distance from the electrode in the P3HT film is much more gradual and occurs over a much greater film thickness, due to the shallow LUMO of P3HT; only $\sim$3.0 eV below $\varepsilon^\text{vac}$\textsuperscript{38,39}. The LUMO of P3HT is in fact above the Fermi level of the electrode and so the electron density transferred – which is motivated by the difference in chemical potential – must be accommodated in defect states in the P3HT bandgap. Since the density of unintentional electron accepting defects states in the band gap of P3HT is expected to be relatively low, due to the high purity of the polymers used in this study,\textsuperscript{40} band bending is much more gradual than for PTB7 and PCDTBT. Crucially, high performance donor-type polymers are invariably characterised by a narrower band gap than P3HT ($<1.8$ eV vs. $\geq 2.0$ eV) and a larger ionisation potential ($\geq 5.2$ eV vs. $\leq 5.0$ eV)\textsuperscript{34–37,39,41,42} the latter of which ensures the highest occupied molecular orbital (HOMO) energy is sufficiently deep lying to achieve a large open-circuit voltage ($V_{\text{oc}}$).\textsuperscript{43} Consequently the LUMO in high performance donor type polymers is, by design, much lower lying than in P3HT, and so the pictures of the interfacial energetics at the interface with PTB7 and PCDTBT shown in Fig. 2(a) and (c) are most representative of the energetics that would be achieved at the interface between the low work function electron-extracting electrode and a high performance narrow band gap donor-type polymer in the absence of a HBL.

As is evident from Fig. 1 and 2, all of the organic semiconductor films accept electron density from the low work function electrode. Notably, for the cases of PCDTBT and P3HT (Fig. 2(a) and (e)) there are two distinct parts to the change in $\varepsilon^\text{vac}$; an initial sharp decrease in $\varepsilon^\text{vac}$ followed by the aforementioned more gradual increase. The latter occurs over a film thickness equivalent to the first few molecular layers of the organic semiconductor. This effect – which has been widely documented to occur at the interface between vacuum deposited small organic molecule films, although sparsely reported at the interface between electrodes and solution processed organic semiconductors – is attributed to the pushback effect, which results from a reduction in the size of the dipole layer at the surface of the electrode rather than charge transfer from the organic semiconductor layer into the electrode.\textsuperscript{29} Using Poisson’s equation (eqn (1)) the average space charge density in each of the organic semiconductors within 5 nm of the interface is calculated to be: PC70BM; $\sim$1.2 C cm\textsuperscript{−3}, P3HT; $\sim$1.5 C cm\textsuperscript{−3}, PCDTBT; $\sim$0.11 C cm\textsuperscript{−3}, PTB7; $\sim$0.16 C cm\textsuperscript{−3}, and P3HT; $\sim$7.3 $\times$ 10\textsuperscript{−3} C cm\textsuperscript{−3}, which are all much greater than the space charge density associated with the photocurrent in high performance OPVs. For example, the hole density at the short-circuit condition under 1 Sun illumination in an OPV based on PTB7:PC\textsubscript{70}BM is estimated to be $4–5 \times 10^{-4}$ C cm\textsuperscript{−3} assuming a photocurrent of 12–15 mA cm\textsuperscript{−2} and the charge carrier mobilities reported by Ebenhoch \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{40} This is three orders of magnitude lower than that formed at the interface due to spontaneous ground state electron transfer, and so it can be concluded that this space charge distribution in the PTB7 phase persists under illumination, and the energy level diagram depicted in Fig. 2(d) is a true picture of the energetics close to the interface in a working device. For the case of P3HT:PC\textsubscript{60}BM OPVs the space charge density due to current flow can be as high as 1.7 $\times$ 10\textsuperscript{−3} C cm\textsuperscript{−3} in optimised devices\textsuperscript{44} (assuming the charge carrier mobilities from Huang \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{45}), which is much closer to the space charge density formed at the interface due to spontaneous ground state electron transfer, although is still several times smaller. Based on these measurements we propose that for BHJ OPVs using high performance donor type materials in conjunction with a low work function reflective electrode, there is no need for a HBL because the
spontaneous formation of a Schottky-type junction in both donor and acceptor phases serves to favour efficient electron-extraction whilst blocking unwanted hole-extraction.

To test the proposed design rule we have fabricated efficient top-illuminated OPVs using the Al|Cu|Al electrode as the electron extracting back reflective electrode with and without a thin ZnO HBL. In order to disentangle optical effects from electronic effects, which is challenging for high performance OPVs based on very thin photoactive layers, we have used a very thin ZnO film of 5 nm ± 1.7 nm. As shown in Fig. 3(a) and Table 1, PTB7 OPVs with and without a ZnO HBL have virtually identical $J_{oc}$, $V_{oc}$ and FF, indicating that the electron-selective function of the ZnO interlayer is not-needed in that case. The external quantum efficiency (EQE) (Fig. 3(b)) of the OPVs with and without the ZnO does however exhibit a small mismatch which, based on the results of the optical simulations shown in Fig. 3(c) and (d) can be attributed to slight differences in the optical field distribution in the device. At shorter wavelengths (∼350 nm) there is however no difference in the photo-response with or without an HBL, which is corroborating evidence that the ZnO film is not needed.

In order to test the generality of this result and to further reduce complexity associated with optical effects, OPVs were fabricated using the archetypal bulk heterojunction P3HT:PC60BM film at the interface with the low work function reflective electrode. The large photo-active layer thickness; ∼220 nm, whilst not optimal for achieving high power conversion efficiency in this device architecture, serves to minimise optical effects resulting from the inclusion of a 5 nm ZnO HBL, since the ZnO thickness is <3% that of the P3HT:PC60BM layer thickness. Just as for the PTB7:PC70BM OPVs, removal of the ZnO layer has no adverse impact on OPV performance (Fig. 4(a) and Table 2). Importantly, in this case there is also no significant difference in the photo-response (Fig. 4(b)) consistent with the comparable optical field distribution in that part of the spectrum over which P3HT:PCBM absorbs (Fig. 4(c) and (d)).

![Fig. 3](image-url) Performance characteristics of OPV devices with the structure: Al (70 nm)|Cu (8 nm)|Al (0.8 nm)|ZnO (5 nm)|PTB7:PC70BM|MoO3 (5 nm)|Ag (11 nm) with and without ZnO HBL: (a) JV characteristics in the dark (dashed line) and under 1 Sun illumination (continuous line). (b) Corresponding EQE spectra. Models of the optical field distribution in the device with (c) and without (d) a ZnO HBL performed using The Essential Macleod, Thin Film Centre Inc. software simulation package.

![Fig. 4](image-url) Performance characteristics of OPV devices with the structure: Al (70 nm)|Cu (8 nm)|Al (0.8 nm)|ZnO (5 nm)|PTB7:PC70BM|MoO3 (5 nm)|Ag (11 nm) with and without ZnO HBL: (a) JV characteristics in the dark (dashed line) and under 1 Sun illumination (continuous line). (b) Corresponding EQE spectra. Models of the optical field distribution in the device with (c) and without (d) a ZnO HBL performed using The Essential Macleod, Thin Film Centre Inc. software simulation package.
Conclusions

In summary, we have shown that in the context of top-illuminated BHJ-OPVs for which the reflective substrate electrode extracts electrons, an electron selective interfacial layer is not required provided the work function of the electron-extracting electrode is less than the energy of LUMO of the donor material. The latter requirement is easily met using high performance narrow band gap electron donor polymers because these materials are characterised by a narrow band gap and relatively large ionisation potential, which results in a low lying LUMO energy. Through a solution of the energetics at the interface between five widely used solution processed organic semiconductors (both donor an acceptor type) and a stable low work function reflective substrate electrode, we have shown that this electron selective/hole-blocking mechanism results from spontaneous ground state electron transfer from the electrode to both components of the BHJ giving rise to a Schottky-type junction. Removing this additional layer simplifies the fabrication of this important class of OPVs and so will help to maximise the cost advantage over other types of PV technology.

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