



At-line monitoring of hydrogen peroxide released from its photocatalytic and continuous synthesis†

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Providing hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) for enzyme-catalyzed reactions requires a careful balance between sufficient reactivity and toxicity. Herein, we demonstrate the photocatalytic synthesis of H₂O₂ in a continuous operation set-up using nitrogen-doped carbon nanodots (N-CNDs) and simultaneous determination of this *in situ* synthesis by continuous measurement with a novel developed H₂O₂ sensor.

Hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) is often used as an oxidizing agent in a variety of applications, *e.g.* wastewater treatment, industrial bleaching,¹ or enzymatic bioreactors. In the latter, H₂O₂ participates in the reactions of peroxidases and peroxygenases,² where two specific types of enzymes have received increased attention within recent years, namely lytic polysaccharide monoxygenases (LPMO),^{3,4} and unspecific peroxygenases (UPO).^{5,6}

A promising way to supply H₂O₂ to biocatalyzed reactions is by generating it *in situ*. This has some advantages compared to an external supply, such as, no dilution of the reaction mixture, which might change reaction parameters. Furthermore, higher (local) concentrations of H₂O₂ at the inlet of a reactor can cause damage to the enzymes and affect their activity and stability. Additionally, *in situ* generation of H₂O₂ might present a more environmentally friendly and safe process compared to the conventional large scale production from oxidation of anthraquinone.^{2,7}

In situ generation of H₂O₂ with a photocatalyst in a bioreactor is an elegant way to provide this delicate substrate on demand. H₂O₂ is produced with a photocatalyst from dissolved oxygen, and is subsequently used as co-substrate in an enzymatic reaction. *In situ* generation of H₂O₂ has previously been reported with enzymatic reactions,⁸ bioelectrocatalysts,^{2,7} or with photocatalysts, such as flavin,⁹ titanium dioxide, or graphite carbon nitride.^{2,7} In general, the use of light for biocatalysis and biocatalysis in flow are relatively new and expanding areas of research, and the advances in the field of photobiocatalysis,¹⁰ and flow biocatalysis can be found elsewhere.¹¹

Here, we focused our efforts on nitrogen-doped carbon nanodots (N-CNDs) as a photocatalyst in dispersed phase.^{12,13} They are used for *in situ* photocatalytic generation of H₂O₂ in a glass capillary with a fixed illumination time, which serves as a model for a continuous plug-flow reactor. Thereby, the H₂O₂ production can be determined by quantification of H₂O₂ in the outlet.

Determination of H₂O₂ is a challenging task, and which method to use depends on the specific application. A common way is with an enzymatic assay, such as horseradish peroxidase.^{14,15} Though, these require sampling and are not suitable for continuous measurements. Alternatively, electrochemical sensors are suited for sustained measurements. However, they tend to lack selectivity due to a relatively high potential applied.^{16,17} Recently, we published an H₂O₂ sensor based on catalytic degradation and optical determination of produced oxygen (O₂). The sensor can be operated *at-line*, and reliably down to one μM H₂O₂.¹⁸

In this short communication, we combined an *at-line* H₂O₂ sensor and photocatalytic generation of H₂O₂ in flow using N-CNDs. The synthesis of H₂O₂ is measured at two flow rates and four different light intensities.

Results and discussion

H₂O₂ is synthesized in a glass capillary (50 μL volume), which acts as a model for a plug-flow reactor, by illuminating an

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N-CND solution flowing through the column. H_2O_2 production is monitored with a connected flow cell with integrated luminescence sensor spots. The sensing scheme is based on the conversion of H_2O_2 to O_2 and H_2O using an immobilized inorganic catalysis (PtNP). The produced oxygen is determined by phosphorescent oxygen sensor particles, which are also embedded in the sensor spot (see Fig. 1B). The sample is deoxygenated before entering the sensor flow cell to increase the sensitivity of H_2O_2 sensing as previously described.¹⁸ A second sensor spot (without PtNP) is used as an O_2 reference prior to the H_2O_2 detection. The difference between the two sensor spots ($\Delta p\text{O}_2$) is consequently the amount of O_2 generated from the *in situ* synthesized H_2O_2 .

The sensor flow cell is operated at flow rates of $30 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ or $50 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$. Increased H_2O_2 concentrations cause increased $\Delta p\text{O}_2$, due to a higher production of O_2 at the H_2O_2 sensor spot (cf. Fig. S1A and C†), and are directly proportional as indicated in the calibration curves (cf. Fig. S1B and D†). The H_2O_2 sensor is fully reversible and shows no hysteresis. The response time of the sensor set-up (including retention time) is 5 or 3 min at flow rates of 30 or $50 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$, respectively (Fig. S1A and C†).

The sensor set-up is connected to an illuminated $50 \mu\text{L}$ glass capillary that serves as a model flow reactor with a 365 nm LED array. H_2O_2 is synthesized in the flow reactor by illuminating the dispersed N-CNDs (2.5% or 5% w/v), Fig. 1A. The residence time is fixed to 35 seconds by covering parts of the capillary to control the length. All of the following results are based on a residence time of 35 s. The light intensity is regulated with resistors of 10, 22, 47, and 82 k Ω , corresponding to photon counts of 45.59, 93.30, 161.69, and 236.30 $\mu\text{mol s}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$, respectively. The set-up is conditioned with N-CND solution prior to measurements, which are performed by switching the LED light source on/off in 15 min cycles, corresponding to 26 residence times. The sensor response to a measurement at $30 \mu\text{L min}^{-1}$ with 2.5% w/v N-CNDs can be seen in Fig. 2A. Initially, the LED is off, and then switched on with different resistances, resulting in different light intensities (see above). This results in production of H_2O_2 , which is measured by the sensor at 15 min. The H_2O_2 production reaches a steady state within a few minutes, and the H_2O_2 concentration returns to the background level of H_2O_2 at approx. 30 min, at which time point the LED is switched off.

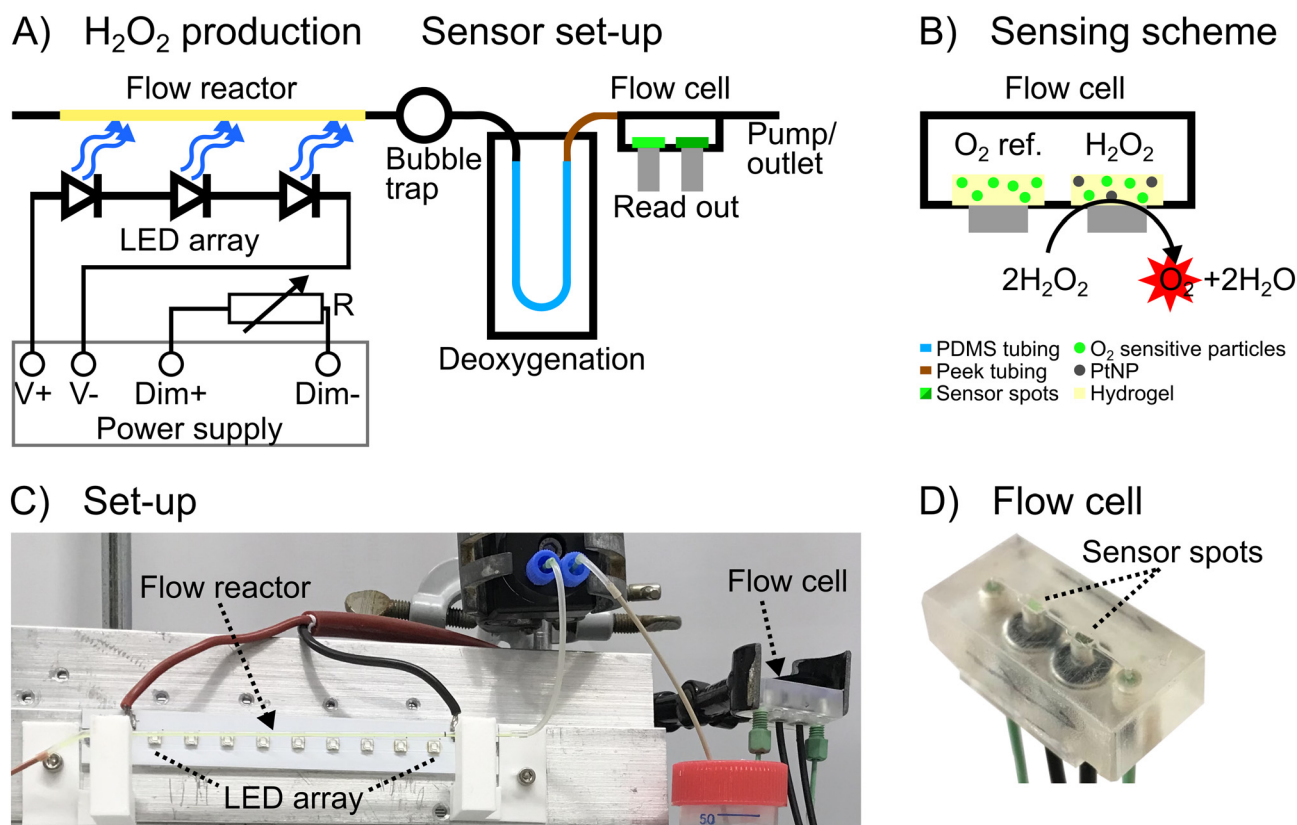


Fig. 1 A) Illustration of the H_2O_2 production and sensor set-up. H_2O_2 is produced by a photocatalyst (N-CNDs) in a model of a flow reactor with an LED array. The produced H_2O_2 solution is then passed through a deoxygenation set-up connected to a sensor flow cell. Here, O_2 is measured with an O_2 reference sensor spot, and H_2O_2 is detected with an H_2O_2 sensor spot. B) H_2O_2 sensing scheme. H_2O_2 is catalytically degraded to H_2O and O_2 with PtNP. The amount of produced O_2 is the difference between the two sensor spots. O_2 is detected with O_2 sensitive particles in both sensor spots. C) Photograph of the H_2O_2 production and detection set-up. The image shows the flow reactor and LED array mounted on an aluminium cooling block, bubble trap, and deoxygenation set-up and sensor flow cell. All transparent tubing was covered with aluminium foil during measurements. D) Photograph of the sensor flow cell. Two sensor spots (O_2 ref. and H_2O_2) are seen in the cell. PEEK tubing (green) and optical fibres (black) for read-out are seen under the cell.



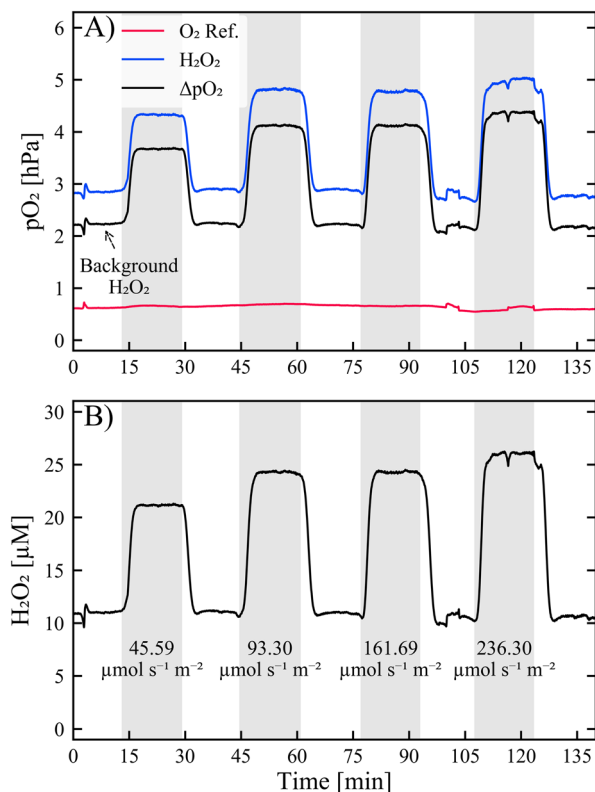


Fig. 2 A) Sensor response with 2.5% N-CND solution at 30 $\mu\text{L min}^{-1}$. 'O₂ ref.' (red line) is the amount of DO measured at the O₂ reference sensor spot, 'H₂O₂' is the amount of O₂ measured at the H₂O₂ sensor spot, and 'ΔpO₂' is the difference between the two sensor spots and the amount of produced O₂. B) H₂O₂ concentrations calculated from ΔpO₂ with the calibration curves in Fig. S1B and D.† The grey boxes indicate when the LED array is turned on, and the numbers are the photon counts in $\mu\text{mol photons per s m}^2$.

H₂O₂ is detected in the N-CND solution without illumination (*cf.* Fig. 2). This is likely caused by a background production of H₂O₂ from ambient light, for instance, during purification or preparation of the solutions. The 'background H₂O₂' is approx. double the amount at double the concentration of photocatalyst N-CNDs, Fig. S3.†

The synthesized amount of H₂O₂ (Fig. S3.†) is calculated from the ΔpO₂ and sensor calibrations. The amount of photogenerated H₂O₂ (Fig. 3) is obtained at each light intensity by subtracting the background H₂O₂. The general trend is that higher LED intensities produce larger amounts of H₂O₂. The difference in produced H₂O₂ between lowest photon count of 45.59 and highest photon count of 236.30 $\mu\text{mol s}^{-1} \text{m}^{-2}$ (resistance of 10 kOhm to 82 kOhm, respectively) is approx. 5 μM for all measurements, except for 2.5% w/v of N-CNDs, with a flow rate of 30 $\mu\text{L min}^{-1}$, where the difference is approx. 2 $\mu\text{M H}_2\text{O}_2$ (*cf.* Fig. 3).

There is little difference in the amount of H₂O₂ produced at different flow rates, due to the similar residence time, (*cf.* Fig. 3). Whereas, there is a greater influence of the N-CND concentration. It should be noted that the synthesis of H₂O₂ is not linear with the N-CND concentration or light intensity

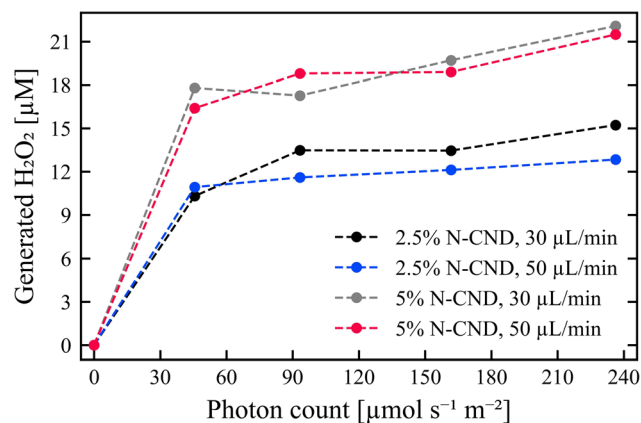


Fig. 3 Amount of H₂O₂ produced with N-CND concentrations of 2.5 and 5%, and flow rates of 30 and 50 $\mu\text{L min}^{-1}$. The values at each light intensity are averages of produced H₂O₂ with the background H₂O₂ subtracted. Sensor responses can be seen in Fig. S2 and S3.†

(including zero values). Overall, this indicates that the H₂O₂ synthesis is 'saturated' at the experimental conditions, which may also explain the relatively low effect of light intensity. When scaling up the system, however, the effect of light penetration depth should also be considered, as light intensity is inversely proportional to the square of the distance. Overall, the productivity of a photocatalytic system in flow set-up needs to be systematically analyzed to identify combinatory or conflicting effects of diverse operational conditions (catalyst amount, catalyst activity, residence time, wavelength of light, light intensity).¹⁹

The LED module develops heat during the experiments. This is confirmed by measuring the temperature with an optical temperature microsensors on the outside of the glass capillary. For that reason, we investigated whether the increased temperature causes autocatalytic synthesis of H₂O₂, by heating a 5% w/v N-CND solution in the absence of light (Fig. S4.†). The increase in temperature did not cause synthesis of H₂O₂, since the ΔpO₂ is stable when the temperature increases up to 80 °C. Therefore, we concluded that the H₂O₂ synthesis originates solely from the photocatalytic reaction catalyzed by N-CNDs. The N-CND solutions were further analyzed for bleaching during the measurements. UV-vis absorbance of the N-CND solutions was measured before and after light exposure (Fig. S4 and S5.†). Neither the 2.5% w/v nor 5% w/v N-CND solutions showed photobleaching under the given conditions.

As mentioned by Battat, Weitz and Whitesides in a perspective article in 2022,²⁰ new technologies will be purchased and utilized if they offer a decisive advantage over older technologies. The sensor's small size and simplicity can ensure its widespread use in the future, even beyond the academic interest. Recently, fed-batch addition of H₂O₂ for unspecific peroxygenase-catalyzed oxyfunctionalizations at 120 mL-scale reached the total turnover numbers up to 909 000, the highest productivity reported so far.²¹ As consecutive steps of that technical demonstration, we believe that biotransformations using H₂O₂ as a (co)substrate can



soon be scaled up. Moving from fed-batch operation to continuous set-up can provide several advantages ranging from selectivity (byproduct-to-product) to mass and heat transfer.²² In this context, precise monitoring of the inflow and outflow of H₂O₂ would be essential to have full process control.

This case study is currently the first of its kind. For the first time, we have been able to show that simultaneous synthesis and concentration measurement of H₂O₂ is possible. While some limitations and challenges need to be addressed in further studies, such as the restricted flow rate of a few milliliters per minute, this study marks a significant step forward in the field.

Conclusions

We have demonstrated the photocatalytic synthesis and monitoring of H₂O₂ in a continuously operated model flow reactor using N-CNDs as photocatalyst.

The synthesis of H₂O₂ reaches a steady state within a few minutes of illumination with LED light sources and increases with light intensity and N-CND concentration. There is no effect of flow rate, with similar residence times between the two flow rates tested. Heating an N-CND solution in absence of light shows no production of H₂O₂, and it is therefore concluded that H₂O₂ is synthesized from N-CND photocatalysis. The N-CNDs show no photobleaching during measurements.

In general, our presented hydrogen peroxide sensor is well suited for flow-chemistry set-ups, but can also be applied in conventional batch reactors to measure H₂O₂ off-line or at-line and is a convenient alternative to enzymatic assays. We see potential applications in determining activity of H₂O₂ producing/consuming enzymes, H₂O₂ as a reactive oxygen species, and H₂O₂ in redox reactions. Our future experiments will be dedicated to coupling the developed set-up with UPOs for selective oxyfunctionalisations. We further envision the possibility of monitoring various bio- and non-bioprocesses relevant to both academia and industry.

In our future work, we will combine the photocatalytic system of *in situ* H₂O₂ synthesis and measurement with biocatalysis, such as enzymatic oxyfunctionalization in microfluidics. This will optimize the process through precise H₂O₂ monitoring and control.

Author contributions

The paper is conceptualized by A. Ø. T. and L.-E. M. Experimental work and data analysis are carried out by A. Ø. T. and B. J. The paper is written by A. Ø. T., L.-E. M., and T. M. The project was supervised by S. K. and T. M. All authors have approved the final version of the paper.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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