Chemical exfoliation efficacy of semiconducting WS$_2$ and its use in an additively manufactured heterostructure graphene–WS$_2$–graphene photodiode

Jay A. Desai,$^{a,b,c}$ Nirmal Adhikari$^d$ and Anupama B. Kaul$^{a,b,c}$

In the present work, various chemical exfoliation routines for semiconducting two-dimensional (2D) layered material WS$_2$ are explored, which include magnetic stirring (MS), shear mixing (SM), and horn-tip (HT) sonication. Current–voltage measurements, Raman spectroscopy, and photoluminescence (PL) spectroscopy were used to characterize the drop-casted WS$_2$ nanosheets produced by these three techniques and our analysis revealed that HT sonication produced the most optimal dispersions. Heterostructure photodetector devices were then fabricated using inkjet printing of the HT sonicated dispersions of WS$_2$ and graphene. The photodetector device performance was measured using a stream of ON/OFF light pulses generated using a red laser with wavelength $\lambda \sim 660$ nm, and an arbitrary waveform generator. From this analysis, the photoresponsivity and detectivity of the graphene–WS$_2$–graphene heterostructure devices were calculated to be $\sim 0.86$ $A/W^3$ and $\sim 10^{13}$ Jones, respectively. Capacitance–voltage (C–V) and C–frequency (f) measurements were also conducted, where the V was swept from $-6$ V to $+6$ V, while the change in C was measured from f $\sim 20$ kHz up to 3 MHz to gain insights into the nature of the graphene–WS$_2$ interface. From the C–V measurements, the C plateaued at $\sim 324.3$ pF from $-4$ V to $+4$ V for the lowest f of 20 kHz and it reduced to $\sim 200$ pF from $-6$ V to $-4$ V, and similarly from $-4$ V to 6 V, C was $\sim 190$ pF. The decrease in C for V $> +4$ V and V $< -4$ V was attributed to the reduction of the interfacial barrier at the electrodes which is suggestive of a Schottky-based photodiode at the graphene–WS$_2$ interface. A sharp decrease in C from $\sim 315.75$ pF at 25.76 kHz to $\sim 23.79$ pF at 480 kHz (at 0 V bias) from the C–f measurements suggests a strong effect of interface trap density on C built-up at the graphene–WS$_2$ interface and the ensuing Schottky barrier height. Our work confirms the excellent potential of solution-cast, trilayer graphene–WS$_2$–graphene heterostructures as a promising photodetector platform using additively manufactured inkjet printing.

1. Introduction

Since the first isolation of graphene in 2004,$^{1,2}$ various layered materials have been the subject of extensive research, especially, the transition metal dichalcogenides (TMDCs) that have shown great interest amongst researchers due to their interesting electronic,$^3$ optical,$^4$ mechanical,$^5$ and chemical$^6$ properties. They represent a class of materials with the formula MX$_2$, where M is a transition metal element (e.g. Mo, W, Ti, V, or Nb) and X is a chalcogen (S, Se or Te). The TMDCs have a layered structure in the form of X–M–X, where two planes of chalcogen atoms are separated by a plane of the metal atoms.$^3$ In many of these semiconducting TMDCs, such as MoS$_2$ and WS$_2$, an indirect-to-direct band gap transition is also observed when the bulk layered material is exfoliated to its monolayer form.$^7,8$ These TMDCs also possess sizeable band gaps of $\sim 1$ to 2 eV which positions them well for many electronic and optoelectronic devices and makes them attractive as viable alternatives to Si-based (bandgap $\sim 1.14$ eV) or GaAs-based (bandgap $\sim 1.43$ eV) electronics and optoelectronics.$^9$

While significant work has been conducted on the exfoliation studies of MoS$_2$ to better understand its optical and electronic properties,$^{10-14}$ the body of work on similar exfoliation studies on WS$_2$ is sparser. In its bulk state, WS$_2$ has an indirect bandgap of $\sim 1.4$ eV but it morphs to a direct bandgap of $\sim 2.1$ eV when thinned to its monolayer form,$^{15}$ which makes it attractive for high-performance optoelectronics$^{16-19}$ and photodetectors operational in the visible regime. Photodetectors are used in a wide range of
applications from imaging to optical communication, as they convert light into electrical signals. Conventional semiconductors such as Si and GaAs used in photodetectors are usually opaque and their brittle nature limits their use on rigid substrates only. The band gap in the visible part of the electromagnetic spectrum and the presence of Van Hove singularities in the electronic density of states enables WS$_2$ nanosheets to exhibit transparency while displaying strong light–matter interactions. They have also demonstrated high performance on flexible substrates with bending curvature down to 5 mm. These remarkable properties empower WS$_2$ to overcome some of the limitations associated with conventional semiconducting channel materials (e.g. Si, GaAs) and promotes its use in bendable and transparent photodetector devices. 

The exfoliated WS$_2$ nanosheets for photodetection and other applications involving the use of a semiconducting channel are produced using bottom-up approaches comprising of physical vapor deposition (PVD) or chemical vapor deposition (CVD), where the WS$_2$ molecules assemble to form mesoscopic 2D nanosheets. The WS$_2$ nanosheets may also be produced using a top-down approach such as mechanical or chemical exfoliation where layers of WS$_2$ membranes are isolated from the bulk toward nanoscale dimensions. Moreover, liquid-phase or chemical exfoliation has been the subject of numerous studies, as it offers a range of advantages over other methods, which includes low-cost, low-temperature (as low as room temperature) processing, attractive scalability towards large formats and its material conserving nature. In general, oxidation and subsequent dispersion in appropriate solvents, ion-intercalation, ion-exchange, and sonication-assisted exfoliation remain commonly explored methods for chemical exfoliation. However, to date, there is no prior work that reports on comparing the efficacy of WS$_2$ chemical exfoliation routes operational at near room temperature. 

In the present work, we have conducted an extensive analysis of several exfoliation routes for forming eco-friendly dispersions of WS$_2$, which includes magnetic stirring (MS), shear mixing (SM), and horn-tip (HT) sonication. After determining the optimal exfoliation route, graphene–WS$_2$–graphene heterostructure photodetectors were designed and fabricated, where WS$_2$ is used as the semiconducting channel material, and graphene, given its finite density of states at the $k$-point from Dirac cones of valence and conduction bands, chemical inertness, and high stability, is used as a highly conducting electrode material. Inkjet printing has been employed as a material-conserving technique for the precise deposition of graphene and WS$_2$ nanosheets in picoliter volumes, which enables ink flow (printable liquid) from the cartridge to the substrate. The liquid undergoes some drying after impact on the substrate depending on the platen temperature used. Raman and photoluminescence (PL) spectroscopy, photocurrent $I_p$, capacitance–voltage ($C-V$), and $C$–frequency ($f$) measurements were amongst the techniques used to characterize our all inkjet-printed photodetector devices which are presented in this paper.

2. Results

As noted, the three techniques used in this work to disperse WS$_2$ in chemical dispersions are magnetic stirring (MS), shear mixing (SM) and horn-tip (HT) sonication. These techniques are illustrated schematically in Fig. 1, which shows the various mechanisms and parameters used in producing single-to-few layer WS$_2$ nanosheets. The first technique, MS, uses a magnetic field to create fluidic shear forces that are generated as a bar magnet is spun in the liquid to generate the stirring and exfoliation action illustrated in Fig. 1(a). The magnetic stirrer moves the fluid in a clockwise direction at predefined revolutions per minute (rpm). When a vial containing the magnetic stirrer and the liquid are placed above the hot plate, the magnetic stirrer also starts to move in a clockwise direction at the same rpm. The energy provided by stirring breaks the 3D layered materials into 2D nanosheets. In the second technique, SM, exfoliation results when a shear force is produced such that one area/layer of the fluid travels with a different velocity relative to the adjacent area/layer. Fig. 1(b) demonstrates the mechanism of shear mixing used in the current work. High-speed rotation of the rotor blades in a clockwise direction results in shear of nanosheets that experience a velocity differential, causing the layers to peel apart. The third technique, exfoliation by HT sonication, exposes the layered material to ultrasonic waves in an appropriate solvent by inducing vibrations through a horn-tip; this is shown in Fig. 1(c). Ultrasonic waves generate cavitation bubbles that collapse into high energy jets, breaking up the layered crystallites to produce exfoliated nanosheets.

The parameters used for MS, SM, and HT sonication are summarized in Fig. 1(d). Here, MS (low) and MS (high) refer to magnetic stirring conditions of 100 rpm and 1500 rpm for 24 hours, respectively. The SM at 2500 rpm and 6000 rpm for 5 hours is referred to as SM (low) and SM (high), respectively, whereas the HT sonication at 20% and 40% power amplitude is denoted as HT (low) and HT (high), respectively. The $I$–$V$ response for drop-casted, annealed MS (low) and MS (high) samples are depicted in Fig. 2(a), while the $I$–$V$ characteristic for drop-casted, annealed SM (low) and SM (high) samples are shown in Fig. 2(b). The inset in Fig. 2(a) shows current data on an expanded scale for the MS (low) case. Similarly, Fig. 2(c) displays the $I$–$V$ behavior for drop-casted and annealed HT (low) and HT (high) samples. All drop-casted samples demonstrated non-ohmic behavior, as shown in Fig. 2(a)–(c), suggestive of the strong semiconducting nature of the WS$_2$ nanosheets. From the electronic transport data, it is evident that the higher electrical conductivity is obtained when WS$_2$ is exfoliated at a higher speed of MS (Fig. 2(a)), higher speed of SM (Fig. 2(b)), and at a higher amplitude of HT sonication (Fig. 2(c)), when the time is kept fixed; this suggests that when the net power applied to the solution is greater, a higher exfoliation rate occurs in all of the three exfoliation routes examined.

Raman and photoluminescence (PL) spectroscopy were used to characterize the ensuing material generated at the low- and
high-level conditions for all the three exfoliation routes. In Raman spectroscopy, the interaction of an incoming laser with the molecular vibrations of the material under examination causes the energy of the reflected photons to either increase or decrease. This shift in energy gives information about the unique vibrational modes that serve as fingerprints of the material. In WS2, there are two primary Raman active modes, the A1g mode which arises from the out-of-plane vibrations involving only sulfur atoms and occurs at 418.8 cm$^{-1}$ and the 2LA(M) mode at 352.4 cm$^{-1}$ due to the in-plane displacement of the tungsten and sulfur atoms. The number of layers may be estimated by either monitoring the red-shift in the A1g mode which refers to the lattice relaxation phenomenon due to the removal of layers, or by calculating the intensity ratio, $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$. As the exfoliation efficacy improves, the number of layers should decrease as deduced from the intensity ratio calculation which is the technique we utilized here. When $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g} > 2.2$ it is suggestive of monolayers, $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g} < 0.47$ signifies WS2 in its bulk form, and $0.47 < I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g} < 2.2$ occurs for few-layer WS2, Fig. 2(d) shows the Raman spectra of MS (low) and MS (high) samples. The $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ [MS (low)] and $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ [MS (high)] were calculated to be 3.83 and 1.17, respectively, indicating the presence of monolayer WS2 and few-layer WS2. Similarly, Fig. 2(e) displays the Raman spectra of SM (low) and SM (high) samples. The $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ [SM (low)] and $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ [SM (high)] samples were found to be 1.16 and 0.92, respectively, again indicating the presence of few-layer WS2. Finally, Fig. 2(f) shows the Raman spectra of HT (low) and HT (high) samples. The $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ [HT (low)] and $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ [HT (high)] were determined to be 2.11 and 1.23, respectively, again indicating the presence of few-layer WS2. The $I_{2LA(M)}/I_{A1g}$ ratio of all the samples is summarized in Table 1.

Photoluminescence refers to the emission of light from a material after the absorption of photons. An extremely weak
PL intensity is an indication of optical transitions that are poor and commonly associated with the indirect band-gap transitions in bulk 2D semiconducting samples. The intensity of the PL spectra increases with a reduction in the number of atomic layers, suggesting direct interband transitions, and reaches a maximum when monolayers are formed. Full-width-at-half-maximum (FWHM) and PL peak shift $\Delta$, were calculated in order to study and compare PL behavior for the low- and high-conditions for each of the three exfoliation routes. Fig. 2(g) shows the PL spectra of the MS (low) and MS (high) samples, where a single peak is evident. However, the PL peak of the MS (high) sample is broader with FWHM $\sim$ 90.4 nm and is red-shifted with $\Delta \sim 4$ nm compared to the PL peak of the MS (low) sample which exhibited a FWHM $\sim$ 87.2 nm. Fig. 2(h) shows the PL spectra of the SM (low) and SM (high) samples displaying a single peak, but the FWHM was higher $\sim$ 144.4 nm.

Table 1 Comparison of intensity ratio $I_{2LA(M)/A_{1g}}$ for samples prepared by different exfoliation routes

|          | MS (low) | MS (high) | SM (low) | SM (high) | HT (low) | HT (high) |
|----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|
| $I_{2LA(M)/A_{1g}}$ | 3.83     | 1.17      | 1.16     | 0.92      | 2.11     | 1.23      |
for the SM (high) sample, and the red-shift $\Delta$ was $\sim$40 nm compared to the SM (low) sample with FWHM $\sim$ 43.6 nm. Fig. 2(i) shows the PL spectra of the HT (low) and HT (high) samples. The PL spectra of the HT (high) sample showed a strong single peak with FWHM $\sim$ 142.6 nm and $\Delta$ is blue-shifted significantly approaching $\sim$147 nm from the weakly defined PL peak of HT (low) sample. It’s interesting to note that the HT sonicated samples were the only ones where the PL peak was blue-shifted at the higher conditions, while the MS and SM samples exhibited red-shifts in the PL peaks. The higher PL intensity of MS (high), SM (high), and HT (high) relative to the MS (low), SM (low), and HT (low), respectively, suggests a greater degree of exfoliation toward thinner molecular membranes.

The higher electrical conductivity of the MS (high), SM (high), and HT (high) samples may be due to the lower resistance offered by the few-layer WS$_2$ nanosheets since inter-layer transport amongst the van der Waals solids is typically poor.$^{45,46}$ However, MS (low) and MS (high) samples appeared to be unstable and WS$_2$ nanosheets precipitated to the bottom of the vial in less than 12 hours. On the other hand, SM (low), SM (high), HT (low), and HT (high) samples were stable for at least 1 month, indicating the practical utility of such inks for prototype device platforms with ink jet printing. The images of the as-prepared solutions and after 12 hours of storage are shown in Fig. 3(a) and (b), respectively. These images illustrate the slightly greyer solution in (b) for the MS (high) case after 12 hours of storage compared to the starkly black dispersion in the as-prepared case in the left-most vial of Fig. 3(a), which suggests that precipitation is occurring after storage for the MS dispersions. In contrast, no visual precipitation or color changes were observed for the SM and HT samples implying their greater stability, to first order. However, HT (high) samples showed higher electrical conductivity among the four stable dispersions, and coupled with the fact that HT sonication resulted in a significant blue-shift of the PL peak, suggestive of quantum confinement effects arising from thinner membranes. It is interesting to note that sonication indeed reduces membrane size of our 2D semiconducting materials as based on our prior studies on WS$_2$. Here the mean size for the as received WS$_2$ powder was $\sim$18 $\mu$m which was reduced to above 2 $\mu$m after sonicating for 30 min. Interestingly, mean particle size for the first mode remained largely unchanged with sonication times of up to 18 hours.$^{47}$ Additionally, the thickness of the printed patterns/films can be controlled with the number of printing passes. As an example, we have reported the change in thickness of graphene patterns that were formed using similar procedures, where the thickness changed from $\sim$505 nm for 10 printing passes to $\sim$1667 nm for 50 printing passes in our recent prior work.$^{48}$ Given that HT sonication resulted in
thinner membranes based on the Raman and PL data, it was used as the approach of choice for inkjet printing our photodetector devices which we report on next.

Horn-tip sonication was used at a 40% power amplitude for 3 hours to form the graphene and WS$_2$ inks. The line pattern of 1 mm (width) and 0.8 mm (length) were printed using the WS$_2$ inks at 40 passes followed by annealing at 250°C for 2 hours. Two 3 mm x 3 mm graphene pads were then printed overlapping regions of the WS$_2$ at the edges, such that the effective WS$_2$ channel length was 0.6 mm, and the samples were then again annealed at 250°C for 2 hours. The inset in Fig. 3(c) shows a representative image of the inkjet printed graphene–WS$_2$–graphene trilayer heterostructure device. Fig. 3(c) illustrates the dark current $I_d$–$V$ characteristic. The same $I_d$–$V$ graph is also plotted on a log scale, as depicted in Fig. 3(d), where $I_d$ was measured to be $\sim$134.2 pA at 0 V; this value is used in our subsequent calculations for determining the device’s electrical response to incident light or responsivity $R$, and the photodetector’s sensitivity to incident light or detectivity $D$. The non-ohmic variation of dark current with voltage is an indication of the rectifying metal–semiconductor junction formation at the graphene–WS$_2$ interface, akin to a Schottky diode.

We then proceeded to make photodetector device measurements for which the measurement set up is displayed in
Fig. 4(a), where an Agilent 33220A 20 MHz arbitrary waveform generator is used as the source of pulses to drive a ThorLabs laser source to produce a stream of periodic ON/OFF light pulses. The ThorLabs S1FC660 laser light source is used which lases at a wavelength $\lambda = 660$ nm through the process of optical amplification. The laser light irradiates the device under test (DUT) mounted inside the Lakeshore CRX-4K cryogenic vacuum probe station. When the laser interacts with the semi-conducting WS$_2$ channel, enhanced electrical conductivity is obtained due to additional charge carriers generated by photon absorption. Laser ON and OFF cycles were generated and the current–time response of the device was captured using the Keysight B1500A semiconductor device analyzer, equipped with the medium power SMU B1511B module. The laser power $P_{\text{laser}}$ was varied by changing the input voltage from 1 V to 5 V in the waveform generator, referred to as $V_{\text{wg}}$ which enabled $P_{\text{laser}}$ to vary from 2.29 mW cm$^{-2}$ to 12.13 mW cm$^{-2}$. A linear relation was observed between $P_{\text{laser}}$ and the $V_{\text{wg}}$ which is reproduced in Fig. 4(b).

Fig. 4(c) illustrates the time-dependent photoresponse of the inkjet printed graphene–WS$_2$–graphene heterostructure device, where the photocurrent $I_p$ increases with $P_{\text{laser}}$, as $P_{\text{laser}}$ rose from 2.29 mW cm$^{-2}$ to 12.13 mW cm$^{-2}$.

The magnitude of $I_p$, $\tau_r$, $\tau_d$, ON/OFF ratio, $R$, and $D$ are key figures-of-merit for characterizing the performance of photodetectors. The time required by the photodetector to reach 90% of maximum $I_p$ value when the laser is switched ON is referred as the rise time and is denoted by $\tau_r$, whereas the time required by the photodetector to reach 10% of the maximum $I_p$ value when the laser is switched off from its ON state is referred to as decay time and is denoted by $\tau_d$. The ON/OFF ratio refers to the ratio of the ON-state current and OFF-state current in a photodetector. The $R$ and $D$ are calculated by using eqn (1) and (2), respectively, where $A$ is the effective channel area in cm$^2$ and $e$ is the electron charge ($1.6 \times 10^{-19}$ C),

$$R = \frac{I_p - I_d}{P_{\text{laser}}} \quad (1)$$

$$D = \sqrt{\frac{A}{2eI_d}R} \quad (2)$$

In reviewing the prior work on WS$_2$, Zhang et al. synthesized WS$_2$ nanotubes by the high-temperature reaction of H$_2$ and H$_2$S while also placing tungsten oxide nanoparticles in a large fluidized bed reactor. They reported Ti/Au/WS$_2$(-nanotube) photodetectors with $\tau_r < 0.245$ ms, $\tau_d < 0.358$ ms, ON/OFF ratio up to $\sim$316, and $R$ up to $\sim$3.14 A W$^{-1}$. In another study, Huo et al. reported Au/WS$_2$ based photodetector with $\tau_r$ and $\tau_d < 20$ ms and $R$ $\sim$ 5.7 A W$^{-1}$. Tan et al. fabricated graphene–WS$_2$ based photodetectors synthesized by chemical vapor deposition where they obtained $R$ up to 3.5 A W$^{-1}$ and $D$ $\sim$ 9.9 $\times$ $10^{10}$ Jones. However, there is no reported prior work on
graphene–WS₂-based all inkjet-printed photodetector thus far, and our work is the first such report to develop and characterize such prototype devices based on inkjet printed WS₂.

Fig. 5(a) and (b) show the τᵣ and τᵣ of <50 ms for a single pulse when \( P_{\text{laser}} \approx 12.13 \text{ mW cm}^{-2} \) was used in the current–time measurements. Fig. 5(c) shows the variation of \( I_{\text{p}} \) and ON/OFF ratio with increasing \( P_{\text{laser}} \). The increase in \( I_{\text{p}} \) from \( \approx 11.83 \mu \text{A} \) to \( \approx 14.15 \mu \text{A} \) and subsequent increase in ON/OFF ratio from \( \approx 7.37 \) to \( \approx 9.07 \) with increase in \( P_{\text{laser}} \) from \( \approx 2.29 \text{ mW cm}^{-2} \) to \( \approx 12.13 \text{ mW cm}^{-2} \) is attributed to the generation of carriers through photon absorption that have energy higher than the band gap of WS₂, which leads to the generation of a higher number of electron–hole pairs since the flux of incoming photons increases as \( P_{\text{laser}} \) is increased. The variation of \( R \) and \( D \) with \( P_{\text{laser}} \) is shown in Fig. 5(d). In order to calculate \( R \) and \( D \), the effective semiconducting channel area \( A \approx \approx 0.006 \text{ cm}^2 \) (0.06 cm length by 0.1 cm width) was used for each value \( I_{\text{d}} \) and \( P_{\text{laser}} \). The inkjet printed graphene–WS₂–graphene heterostructure device showed a high \( R \) of \( \approx 0.86 \text{ A/W} \) at \( P_{\text{laser}} = 2.29 \text{ mW cm}^{-2} \), while the maximum \( D \) obtained was \( \approx 10^{13} \) Jones at the same laser intensity.

Capacitance–voltage (C–V) measurements were also conducted to study the nature of the graphene (M)–WS₂ (S) interface. The voltage applied was across two graphene contacts by placing probe tips on these pads, as illustrated in Fig. 6(a). The C was measured as a function of bias voltage \( V \) using the Keysight B1500A semiconductor device analyzer with the multi-frequency CMU B1520A unit attached. As stated previously, the non-linearity in the \( I_{\text{d}}–V \) measurement is attributed to the Schottky diode-type behavior of the graphene–WS₂ interfacial junction. Therefore, two Schottky diodes are in series with each other in the inkjet printed graphene–WS₂–graphene heterostructure device. Fig. 6(b) shows the rise and fall in \( C \) at various frequencies ranging from 20 kHz up to 3 MHz, while \( V \) was
The initial rise in capacitance is attributed to the removal or reduction of the Schottky barrier against electron flow at the graphene–WS$_2$ interface. Capacitance remains constant up to a certain bias voltage and then it decreases. The subsequent fall in capacitance at lower frequencies is attributed to the formation of a Schottky barrier between the graphene and WS$_2$ layers. This effect is more pronounced at lower frequencies because of the increased electron transfer across the barrier. The capacitance becomes nearly constant at higher frequencies as the influence of the barrier diminishes.

Swept from $-6$ V to 6 V, the initial capacitance shows a significant decrease, which is attributed to the formation of a Schottky barrier against electron flow at the graphene–WS$_2$ interface. Capacitance remains constant up to a certain bias voltage and then decreases. The subsequent fall in capacitance is dependent on the formation of a Schottky barrier at the graphene–WS$_2$ interface, where the magnitude of capacitance is higher when compared to the other two techniques for formulating semiconducting WS$_2$ nanosheets that are stable for at least one month. One drop of each sample was cast on a SiO$_2$/Si wafer and 5 ml of C/T solution mixture was then added to each vial. A magnetic stir bar was then put in both glass vials. One vial was magnetically stirred at 100 rpm (MS (low)), while another vial was stirred at 1500 rpm (MS (high)) for 24 hours to generate the dispersion.

For sonication, the WS$_2$ powder was taken in two separate glass vials and 50 ml of C/T solution mixture was then added as previously. This was the minimum amount of solution required for using our shear mixer. Lower speed of 2500 rpm (SM (low)) and the highest speed of 6000 rpm (SM (high)) was used for 5 hours of shear mixing. These parameters were established to achieve uniform mixing while minimizing overheating.

For HT sonication, a solution of WS$_2$ was taken in two separate glass beakers and 20 ml of C/T solution mixture was then added. This was the minimum amount of solution required for horn-tip sonication. A minimum power amplitude of 20% (HT (low)) and a maximum of 40% (HT (high)) was used for 3 hours. Pulse ON and OFF times were 30 seconds each, respectively, and the total sonication time was 6 hours. The parameters for sonication were also chosen such that it was performed at room temperature without overheating the samples.

Extreme parameters are used for all three methods with liquid-phase exfoliation to optimize the conditions for yielding semiconducting WS$_2$ nanosheets that are stable for at least one month. One drop of each sample was cast on a SiO$_2$/Si wafer using a plastic pipette. Annealing was performed at 250 °C for 2 hours to ensure complete dissolution of EC in the C/T solution mixture. The maximum power amplitude of 30% (HT (low)) and a maximum of 40% (HT (high)) was used for 3 hours. Pulse ON and OFF times were 30 seconds each, respectively, and the total sonication time was 6 hours. The parameters for sonication were also chosen such that it was performed at room temperature without overheating the samples.

In summary, our work has revealed that HT sonication offered electrical conductivities higher than those obtained by SM but lower than those obtained by MS, while providing the highest stability when compared to the other two techniques for formulating dispersions of semiconducting WS$_2$. From this work, the inkjet printed graphene–WS$_2$–graphene heterostructure devices were constructed using HT sonication. The non-ohmic I–V for the inkjet printed graphene–WS$_2$–graphene heterostructure devices indicated a Schottky diode type behavior where the optoelectronic properties were promising and yielded a maximum $R$ of $\sim 0.86$ A W$^{-1}$, $D$ of $\sim 10^{13}$ Jones. While $\tau_2$ and $\tau_3$ were $< 50$ ms. The C–V measurements at various frequencies showed the rise and fall in capacitance values, which is attributed to the formation of a Schottky barrier at the graphene–WS$_2$ and WS$_2$–graphene interfaces, respectively. The $C$ obtained was as high as $\sim 324.88$ pF at frequencies of $\sim 20$ kHz, while it decreased down to $\sim 2.81$ pF for frequencies as high as 3 MHz.

4. Experimental

Cyclohexanone (70%) (Sigma Aldrich # 398241)/terpineol (30%) (Sigma Aldrich # 86480) solution (C/T) mixtures were prepared in glass vials. Ethyl cellulose, EC (2.5 weight%) (Sigma Aldrich # 200646) was then added to the solution and bath sonicated for 2 hours to ensure complete dissolution of EC in the C/T solution mixture. This particular combination of C/T/EC was used because it has a viscosity of about $\sim 12$ cP which is ideal for inkjet printing, as reported in our previous work. The WS$_2$ powder (Sigma Aldrich # 243639) was used at a concentration of 30 mg ml$^{-1}$ for all our experiments.

For MS, the WS$_2$ powder was taken in two separate glass vials and 5 ml of C/T/EC solution mixture was then added to each vial. A magnetic stir bar was then put in both glass vials. One vial was magnetically stirred at 100 rpm (MS (low)), while another vial was stirred at 1500 rpm (MS (high)) for 24 hours to generate the dispersion. For SM, the WS$_2$ powder was taken in two separate glass beakers and 50 ml of C/T/EC solution mixture was then added as previously. This was the minimum amount of solution required for using our shear mixer. Lower speed of 2500 rpm (SM (low)) and the highest speed of 6000 rpm (SM (high)) was used for 5 hours of shear mixing. These parameters were established to achieve uniform mixing while minimizing overheating.
Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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