Microfluidics and materials for smart water monitoring: A review

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Microfluidic devices are reviewed for drinking, sewage, continental and seawater. Functional materials became alternatives to conventional valves & sensors in microfluidics. Microfluidic systems for water monitoring are reaching commercialization. Functional materials and microfluidics improve deployable water systems.

Abstract

Water quality monitoring of drinking, waste, fresh and seawaters is of great importance to ensure safety and wellbeing for humans, fauna and flora. Researchers are developing robust water monitoring microfluidic devices but, the delivery of a cost-effective, commercially available platform has not yet been achieved. Conventional water monitoring is mainly based on laboratory instruments or sophisticated and expensive handheld probes for on-site analysis, both requiring trained personnel and being time-consuming. As an alternative, microfluidics has emerged as a powerful tool with the capacity to replace conventional analytical systems. Nevertheless, microfluidic devices largely use conventional pumps and valves for operation and electronics for sensing, that increment the dimensions and cost of the final platforms, reducing their commercialization perspectives. In this review, we critically analyze the characteristics of conventional microfluidic devices for water monitoring, focusing on different water sources (drinking, waste, fresh and seawaters), and their application in commercial products. Moreover, we introduce the revolutionary concept of using functional materials such as hydrogels, poly(ionic liquid)
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1. Introduction

Water security is recognized as one of the great challenges of the 21st century by many international organizations. For instance, the World’s Health Organization (WHO) sets water quality assessment as a top global priority, including safe water supplies for drinking and recreation, hygienic sanitation and good water management for human health [1]. Unfortunately, water pollution and water-related diseases have negative consequences on the body [2] such as diarrhea, which kills around 900,000 people every year in developing countries [1,3,4]. Moreover, environmentally speaking, alterations in the nutrients and oxygen balance can result in eutrophication; the uncontrolled growth of plants or algae in water bodies [5].

Therefore, continuous monitoring of water resources such as fresh water, seawater, and, in particular, wastewater and drinking water, for human and animal consumption, is essential [6]. To do that, physicochemical parameters such as temperature, pH, salinity, oxygen balance, acid neutralizing capacity and nutrient concentrations (nitrates and nitrites, phosphates, ammonium, silicates, sulfates, etc.) need to be monitored and controlled, to guarantee optimal water quality [7]. Traditionally, water samples are collected at the point-of-need, by trained personnel, and transported to specialized analytical laboratories for quality control [8–14]. Advantages of laboratory-based methods include the possibility of analyzing many samples with high accuracy and precision, obtaining low limits of detection (LOD) and quantification (LOQ), with automated equipment. Their main disadvantage is that this equipment is not generally portable, therefore neglecting in situ analysis and potentially compromising the stability of samples. Economically speaking, this equipment is expensive and requires trained personnel to prepare and handle the samples. However, this type of technology is evolving continuously, generating more compact, easy to use and cheap equipment which can be operated at conventional laboratory facilities. This is the case of portable kits that allow on-site testing and have become very useful when resources are limited since they are fast, simple and inexpensive. The downside of portable devices is that they require trained personnel during use and do not offer accurate results. They often only provide estimations of the composition of water and as such, do not fully meet user needs [15]. As an alternative to portable kits, water quality analysis probes have been developed and commercialized. The main advantage of these devices, together with their portability, is their high accuracy. The most advanced versions integrate wireless sensor networks, where data can be collected and delivered through the internet [16]. However, they are not always affordable due to their elevated costs and the need for manual labor during data collection.

The natural evolution of this technology presents a future where humanity will make use of effective, deployable and autonomous sensors in lakes and rivers, water supply systems and even connected to municipal and industrial wastewater treatment plants, for accurate and precise water monitoring at the point-of-need. Furthermore, the information will be made available to citizens through the Internet. In the future, these sensors may also become wearable, and the user able to monitor his/her surrounding water environment.

Despite the huge efforts to develop innovative sensors [17], the current state-of-the-art for autonomous environmental devices to monitor the chemical and biological status of our water resources is based on autonomous flow systems [18] that employ conventional pumps, valves and fluid handling components, and because of this, these systems are usually expensive (often > €20K per unit). Therefore, the goal is to generate autonomous devices that integrate all necessary steps for defined (bio)-chemical analysis such as sampling, sample transport, filtration, dilution, chemical reaction, separation and detection without the need for conventional components. This concept is called micro Total Analysis System (μTAS) [19]. Indeed, a μTAS or a lab-on-a-chip (LOC) has the potential to shrink the technology of an entire laboratory to a chip format. Reviewers stated that LOC and electrochemical sensing-based portable monitoring systems are good alternatives to conventional methods [6] and present the advances of different methodologies within microfluidic-based sensors for water quality monitoring [2]. In particular, two main aspects are rapidly developing and adapting to the new needs of water monitoring:

(1) the engineering of the equipment used for analysis both in lab and in field, that has evolved towards the miniaturization of the device and to the incorporation of more precise
monitoring, focusing on different water sources such as drinking water sources. The integration of functional materials, as an alternative to microfluidics, allows easy operation, full automation, increase throughput and improve repeatability by reducing human errors. Moreover, the review will give a material science perspective, the key to change the current model is to drive down the cost per unit, making autonomous environmental devices available for handheld systems based on a centrifugal microfluidic device [26]; right: point-of-need microfluidic device [27]. (1) Current platforms are expensive, bulky and difficult to miniaturize and integrate to meet scalability. (2) Truly scalable device development comes through the integration of innovative breakthroughs in materials research and microfluidics.

2. Microfluidic devices for water monitoring

Microfluidic devices provide a way to perform analysis in remote locations, enabling in situ analysis at the point-of-need [28]. Reduced measurement times, improvements in sensitivity, enhancement of selectivity and high repeatability are advantages of microfluidic devices when integrated into µTAS [29]. Despite the huge efforts of researchers in providing fully integrated, portable and feasible platforms for environmental sensing, µTAS are hardly used in commercial products. Several examples have reached the market, such as the 2100 Bioanalyzer of Agilent Technologies, micromixers and microreactors from Micronit, and multiflux by Dolomite, but are mainly focused on point-of-care diagnostics [30]. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, they are not commercial examples of this type of technology used as integrated or standardized analytical processes for water monitoring.

In 2010, Royce W. Murray highlighted that the analytical chemistry community is facing the challenge of developing environmental platforms for water monitoring [31]. Nowadays, these platforms are becoming available through microfluidics but are still struggling with reliability. George Whitesides referred to this issue in 2014 stating that “LOC technology is now shifting from fundamental areas to serious explorations of uses and to demonstrations and applications with real potential to provide the incentive for further and more extensive industrial engineering development, and ultimately to incorporate into industrial processes” [32]. Today, this is a reality, as it is now possible to produce microfluidic technology on a large scale. The next step is to merge the knowledge coming from research with the needs of industry, to translate this technology into commercial success [33].

Over the last few years, microfluidic devices and platforms have been delivered for the monitoring of pollutants in a variety of water sources: drinking water, waste and sewage waters, fresh water (rivers, lakes, …), and seawater. Drinking water devices are normally fabricated to detect pathogens and bacteria. In contrast, waste and sewage, fresh water and seawater devices need to be deployable for long periods, under harsh environmental conditions. There are many reviews available that give a wider perspective of microfluidic technology for environmental monitoring [21] but none of them summarized the existing technology for different water sources.

In the following sections, the state-of-the-art of deployable microfluidic devices and field-deployable microfluidic systems for in situ biological and chemical analysis in different water sources will be reviewed in Table 1. Besides, the general operation; the type of data obtained; the designing factors that determine the effectiveness and the challenges facing their commercialization will be described.

2.1. Drinking water

One of the biggest concerns, which justifies the need of monitoring water quality, is the possible presence of bacteria [36,37], parasites [73,74], or other pollutants [37,38,75–84] that could be harmful to humans, through the consumption of water. Since bacteria, parasites and pathogens are presented in very low numbers in potable water, large volumes of water need to be condensed and to reach the threshold of detection for current detection methods. This is a limitation of the existing technology, therefore multiple methods, including force spectroscopy [85], cytometry [86], laser scattering [73], electrochemical [87] and electrophoresis [17] were adopted by microfluidic technology to overcome the extremely low number of bacteria or pollutants to be analyzed in the sample. Another approach to improve detection is to exploit the intrinsic electrical properties of bacteria by the combination of two electrical techniques such as dielectrophoresis (DEP) and impedance measurements [88]. Their combination with microfluidic devices has the potential of developing accurate, cost-
| Real sample/matrix | Organism/target pollutant | Microfluidic device/detection technique | Ref |
|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----|
| **Drinking water/potable** | **E. Coli** | Poly(methyl) siloxane (PDMS) device. | [34] |
|                   | Bacteria (E. coli, Salmonella, and Pseudomonas) and viruses (MS-2 and Echovirus) | Loop-mediated isothermal amplification (LAMP) detection. | |
|                   | **E. Coli** | Gold-deposited glass slide. | [35] |
|                   | Lindane | Electrophoretic transport and electrostatic trapping. | [36] |
|                   | Copper (Cu²⁺), zinc (Zn²⁺), potassium dichromate and 3,5-dichlorophenol | Dielectrophoretic focusing and impedance. | [37] |
| **Wastewater**    | **Copper (Cu²⁺)** | Poly carbonate (PC). | [38] |
|                   | Nitrite | Electro Cell-substrate Impedance sensing | |
|                   | Aromatic amines | Glass/PDMS microfluidic device. | [39] |
|                   | Potassium and nitrate | Fiber optic sensor. | |
|                   | Sulfide | Glass/silicon wafers. | [40] |
|                   | Ammonium | Electrophoresis and fluorescence detector. | [41] |
|                   | Nitrite and nitrate | Not described. | [42] |
|                   | Sulfide and nitrite | Low temperature co-fired ceramic-based potentiometry/ion selective electrodes. | |
| **Fresh water**   | Phosphorous | Poly(lactic acid). | [43] |
|                   | pH | Sulfide-based electrode/potentiometry. | [44] |
|                   | Ammonium | Ammonium-selective electrodes/potentiometry. | |
|                   | Nitrite and nitrate | Poly(methylmethacrylate) (PMMA). | [45] |
|                   | Nitrite and nitrate | Photodiode/absorbance. | [46] |
|                   | Organophosphate | Not described. | [47] |
|                   | Hydrogen peroxide | Absorbance. | [48] |
|                   | Mercury (II) | Absorbance. | [49] |
|                   | Mercury (II) | Fluorescence. | [50] |
|                   | Lead (II) | Fluorescence. | [51] |
|                   | Ethynylestradiol | Fluorescence. | [52] |
|                   | Atrazine | Not described. | [53] |
|                   | Bacteria | Absorbance. | [54] |
|                   | Phosphate | Absorbance. | [55] |
|                   | Phosphate | Absorbance. | [56] |
| **Seawater**      | Salinity | Absorbance. | [57] |
|                   | Cadmium | Absorbance. | [58] |
|                   | Nitrite | Absorbance. | [59] |
|                   | Mercury (II) | Absorbance. | [60] |
|                   | Nutrients | Fluorescence. | [61] |
|                   | Silicate | Fluorescence. | [62] |
|                   | Phosphate | Fluorescence. | [63] |
|                   | pH | Fluorescence. | [64] |
|                   | pH | Fluorescence. | [65] |
effective and simple-to-use portable platforms. Regarding pre-concentration of large volumes of sample, the use of integrated commercial membranes within PDMS-based devices have demonstrated to capture \(10^{-1}\) \(\mu\)m-scale particles with high efficiency, due to the complementary advantages offered by microfluidics [34]. It is particularly challenging to accurately quantify microorganisms when present in water at low numbers (<100 CFU mL\(^{-1}\)). In order to decrease the LOD and achieve high-throughput analysis, a device able to increase bacteria concentrations by positive dielectrophoretic impedance \(E. coli\) focusing was proposed, achieving a LOD of 300 CFU mL\(^{-1}\) with a sensitivity of 100 CFU mL\(^{-1}\) [36], Fig. 2A. As an alternative to the use of commercial membranes, electrical forces can be used to pre-concentrate samples, by exploiting the negative surface charges of bacteria and viruses [35].

Interestingly, mammalian cells have been used as sensors for toxicity measurements of toxicants like lindane [37]. It is known that a major limitation of using a mammalian cell-based biosensor for field-testing is the difficulty of maintaining cell viability and sterility outside of a cell culture facility. Therefore, devices reliant on cells will not be practical to scale for commercialization. By adding a self-contained disposable media delivery system to the sensor, cells are kept alive, but still, the model does not meet market requirements as bulky fluidic handling is necessary.

Other analytes of interest in drinking water that have been investigated in microfluidic devices are metals, such as copper [38,75,80,84], lead [76], semimetals like arsenic [81], water safety indicators such as nitrite and nitrate [77,82], the total concentration of calcium and magnesium [78], chlorine [79] and iodine [83]. For instance, the presence of copper in drinking water usually does not exceed more than few milligrams per liter, although higher concentrations could be detected in waters coming from newly installed copper pipes. For this reason, it is of great importance to be able to effectively monitor copper in pipes. Bioluminescent analyzers that use living organisms as sensors, integrated within microfluidic systems, allow the monitoring of heavy metal ions such as copper and zinc. As an example, these devices were used for the analysis of water samples taken from Tønsberg’s pipes in Norway. However, the sensitivity of the system is fairly low and can only sense acute toxicity and more appropriate as a warning device, rather than an actual quantifier of toxicants [38]. Higher sensitivity would be necessary to be able to commercialize these types of drinking water household systems.

Numerous microfluidic-based developments have been made to improve safety in drinking water. As mentioned above, most of the reviewed articles, which use microfluidics, focused on bacteria detection, finding little literature about metals. These systems often employ conventional fluidic handling devices thus, it is hard to find examples implemented in real-life scenarios or reaching competitive markets. Therefore, accurate, portable microfluidic systems to monitor safety in potable water have not been delivered to society yet, despite their continuous evolution.

2.2. Wastewater

Waste and sewage waters are generated by a variety of sources, where the concentration and type of contaminants found in the present high variability. Therefore, the detection methods employed for analysis should be adaptable and comply with regulations and quality standards. Water quality can be affected by several factors including the presence of chemical pollutants and pathogens, which harm human and ecosystem health. As an

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**Fig. 2.** LOC systems developed for different water matrices. A) Bacteria sensor consisting of a region that utilizes positive dielectrophoresis for \(Escherichia\) \(coli\)-focusing, and an \(E. coli\)-sensing region that employs dielectrophoretic impedance measurements in drinking water samples, modified from Ref. [36]. B) Scheme of the fabrication and functioning of a 3D microfluidic device showing locations of the electrodes and dimensions used for the detection of sulfur in wastewaters, modified from Ref. [43]. C) Picture of an autonomous sensing platform for phosphate analysis in fresh waters. Inside picture: (A) inlet system, (B) bags holding the sample, high calibration standard, and low calibration standard, (C) detection chamber housing the microfluidic chip, LED (375 nm), and photodiode, (D) poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA) fluidic board, (E) battery, (F) reagent bag, (G) waste bag and (H) electronics, modified from Ref. [61]. D) Pictures of a LOC phosphate sensor deployed in seawater. (Left) A fully assembled sensor with reagent housing. (Top-right) LOC sensor before placement in the watertight sensor housing. (Bottom) One of the PMMA layers of a phosphate LOC (Sensor 1) showing the micromilled microfluidic channels prior to device sealing, modified from Ref. [71].
example, wastewater systems are currently being monitored to determine the levels of the SARS-COV-2 virus [89,90], to identify and monitor the incidence of the virus in a community. For this reason, the routine monitoring of pollutants in wastewater systems, involving simple and inexpensive technologies, is a priority in society. In this sense, microfluidics has demonstrated simultaneous quantification and monitoring of the presence of a wide range of pollutants in wastewaters [91].

For instance, copper is a recurrent metal to be determined in water. In this regard, a hybrid glass/PDMS microfluidic device coupled to an optical sensor was developed for the determination of Cu(II) in industrial wastewater [39]. This technology seems very promising for commercialization and possible implementation in industrial wastewater systems and could set the basis for the development of an automatic system for direct monitoring of Cu(II) in municipal treatment plants.

As a step forward to get deployable devices, micro-flow-injection analysis (μFIA) coupled to microfluidics was used for nitrite determination using the Griess-Ilosvay reaction. It is remarkable to mention that the system was placed on-line in a wastewater treatment plant. The optical measurements were performed using a light-emitting diode (LED) as an emitter and a photodiode as a detector. This system proved to be accurate in two concentration ranges (0–50 and 0–250 mg L\(^{-1}\)) with features comparable to those provided by conventional methods [40].

Aromatic amines, which have been demonstrated to be carcinogenic and mutagenic, even at very low concentrations, can be released into the environment from the industry. In response, a simple, sensitive and rapid method which combines electro-photocatalysis within microfluidics was developed. It presents a remarkably low LOD (nm L\(^{-1}\) range), good repeatability and recovery rates (85–110%). Moreover, if a pre-concentration technique is applied to this method, concentrations in the range of pmol L\(^{-1}\) could be determined [41].

Microfluidic technology has not only been applied to land-based samples. This technology has also been used in space engineering [42]. For example, a low temperature co-fired ceramics, with a continuous flow potentiometric microanalyzer, was developed to simultaneously monitor the presence of potassium and nitrate in samples from the water recycling process in space missions. The system integrated a microfluidic device and two ion-selective electrodes, built with nitrate and potassium polymeric membranes and a screen-printed Ag/AgCl reference electrode. Through the development of this system, integrated and compacted devices for the simultaneous determination of multiple analytes on-field was demonstrated.

Integration and portability are key factors in obtaining devices that could be implemented on-field and thus, commercialized. For instance, a sulfide-selective potentiometric sensor integrated into a 3D microfluidic system was tested in wastewater samples, Fig. 2B. The device was validated with real samples, showing no significant differences when compared to conventional methods [43]. The same year, a transducer coupled to a microfluidic device for ammonium-selective sensing in the sewers of the Berlin network was published, with a LOD of 4.10\(^{-3}\) M and a response time between 10 and 12 s. The key feature of this device was its ability to perform electrochemical measurements combined with passive microfluidics in real-time [44]. The use of passive flow for sampling eliminated the need for external pumps and valves and thus, reduced power consumption, while incremented portability and integration. As demonstrated in this section, there is a growing interest in the development of integrated microfluidic devices for the analysis and monitoring of wastewater at the point-of-need. A commonality between these systems is their accuracy, low reagent consumption and negligible waste generation; three important aspects to deliver robust deployable systems. However, at this moment, they still lack commercial application as they depend on conventional fluidic equipment.

2.3. Fresh water

Fresh water bodies are defined as flowing waters, lakes, reservoirs and groundwater. For example, when rain falls to the ground, water keeps moving along the land surfaces to form streams or lakes. It evaporates into the atmosphere and soaks into aquifers from which the public drinking water is obtained. Unfortunately, the groundwater can be contaminated by chemicals or pollutants and thus, the sources of public water [92]. Therefore, the continuous monitoring of these waters is of great importance to manage and protect water ecosystems. In this context, microfluidic based devices and sensors are capable of monitoring water quality and so, identifying pollutants in fresh waters.

Many developments have been published for the monitoring of nutrients within fresh waters. In the following section, we will briefly introduce some of the most inspiring examples. Diamond’s group was a pioneer, by publishing a microfluidic device sensor for long-term phosphate monitoring, which incorporates fluid sampling, reagent storage, detection and wireless communication into a portable platform. The device was improved over the years in terms of fluidic handling, to reduce dimensions and the final cost of production [45–47]. Later on, the same group presented a portable and fully autonomous sensor platform for in situ pH measurement of water samples. This sensor has the advantage of having integrated reagents storage, which is stable for up to 8 months with proved reproducibility and good repeatability. This research group has made remarkable progress over the years in the field of portable and autonomous water sensors, devices and systems [61,93]. Fig. 2C. At the same time, examples of simultaneous determination of sulfite/nitrite in pond and river waters [49], ammonium in rain a river waters [50], nitrite/nitrate in lake [51] and river [52] have appeared. Overall, these sensors comprise valves, pumps, fluidics and reagents handling. Some of them are deployed for over three weeks, measuring more than 160,000 samples. In this case, despite the high measurement frequency, the fluid consumption of the sensor was remarkably lower than those in previously reported systems [52]. Low fluid consumption is important as this, along with power considerations which determines the length and/or measurement frequency of sensor deployment.

Regarding the analysis of pollutants, organophosphate nerve agents such as paraoxon and methyl parathion were detected in river water samples. The integrated system offered rapid and simultaneous measurement at micromolar levels of both poisons [53]. Hydrogen peroxide, when present in rainwater, is an efficient oxidizer of sulfur dioxide to produce sulfuric acid, an important compound in acid rain formation. Hydrogen peroxide was collected from rainwater and snow and analyzed by chemiluminescence [54]. In addition, metals present in fresh waters can seriously affect marine fauna and flora therefore, Hg (II) [55,56] and Pb (II) [57] were analyzed in river water samples using microfluidic technology.

As for potable and drinking water, the control of bacteria and pathogens growths in fresh waters is of great importance to avoid intoxications and ensure humans safety in recreational waters. In this regard, immuno sensors have been selected as the gold standard for rapid quantification of acetylcholine esterases [58] and atrazine [59] in river water samples. These devices showed high versatility and suitability for point-of-care analysis, with the possibility of building up array systems. Recently, bacteria have been detected by counting active bacteria stained with fluorescence
dyes, 6CFDA- and SYBR Green II-staining. The number of bacteria analyzed with the portable microfluidic system was compared to the conventional fluorescence microscopy method, showing no significant differences. However, smaller cells such as esterase-active cells were not accurately determined [60].

Czogula et al. [94] described a wireless paired emitter detector diode device as an optical sensor for water quality monitoring in a lab-on-a-disc device. This technology allows the analysis of a high amount of water samples at the point-of-need without the need for any external energy input. The microfluidic platform was applied for quantitative pH and qualitative turbidity monitoring of water samples. Fresh river water samples were analyzed, obtaining a very good correlation with standard bench-top systems.

It is important to mention that paper microfluidics have emerged as a cheap alternative to polymer-based microfluidics. They also offer less reagent consumption and easier on site measurement. Jayawardane et al. [62] evaluated a paper-based device for the determination of reactive phosphate in natural and soil waters based on the formation of phosphomolybdenum blue. The described device had low cost, fast and portable features and the device used less reagent than conventional laboratory devices. A general drawback found in microfluidic paper-based devices is their lack of robustness when long-term deployment is needed. It is a new technology in continuous development, which will bring smart solutions to deployable water monitoring devices.

Nevertheless, microfluidic sensors for fresh water monitoring, are still using slow sensors with complex architectures, requiring microfabricated manifolds, multiple valves and pumps.

2.4. Seawater

The quality of seawater depends, to a great extent, on the equilibrium in the concentration of compounds like nitrite, nitrate, ammonium and phosphate, which are denominated as nutrients, and salinity. An excess in the concentration of nutrients could lead to a detrimental state for the marine fauna and flora. In addition, physicochemical parameters such as pH, temperature, and conductivity among others are of importance to monitor water quality and to prevent deterioration, which may be lethal for marine ecosystems. Microfluidic devices may be integrated with industrial processes such as desalination plants. In this regard, integrated microfluidic sensors that measure temperature, conductivity, and salinity from harvested water from a pilot-scale desalination plant over a short period have been developed [63]. pH has been measured in a LOC by colorimetric assays coupled to a robust optical set-up and short-term deployed in European waters with high accuracy (0.001 pH, n = 20) and precision (0.004 pH) [23]. Others, worked on pH colorimetric assays based on meta-cresol purple as indicator dye, featuring high resolution (0.002 pH units for the 7.500–8.200 range), and linearity (R² of 0.9994) but lacking fully autonomous performance [72]. The work presented by Yücel et al. [95] evidenced a clear example of an integrated deployable microfluidic device submerged in the deep ocean and set in seawater for two days.

During the development of LOC devices, fluid flow analysis, highly integrated systems with fast analysis capabilities became a trend. It is difficult to find examples of integrated sensors that can continuously monitor, for long periods, with high accuracy, low consumption and strong anti-interference ability seawater sources [70]. Therefore, microfluidics capable of performing long-term autonomous sampling for seawater environmental monitoring have not been widely reported yet. Nevertheless, several examples of on-site water analyzers for cadmium [64], nitrite [65,66], phosphorous [22,71] and mercury [67,68] determination were published.

Autonomous systems for the determination of phosphorous in seawater, based on the valadomolybdate method, were published [22,71]. We would like to highlight the work done by Gran et al. where not only the long-term deployment of a phosphate LOC analyzer was demonstrated, but also the proximity in terms of accuracy and precision to reference standard methodologies [71], Fig. 2D.

Despite the huge efforts made in the development of autonomous microfluidic devices for seawater applications, no examples of real implementations have reached the market yet. Deployable devices should appear in the coming years to reduce the gap between laboratory experimentation and product commercialization, through device validation in real scenarios.

In particular, is interesting to mention the use of centrifugal microfluidics for seawater analysis. The simultaneous determination of nitrate, nitrite, ammonium, orthophosphate, and silicate in coastal seawater samples, collected from Chunsu Bay, South Korea, was presented [69]. The device integrated all processes (sample filtering, metering, mixing, reaction, colorimetric detection) and liquid flow was controlled by laser irradiation on ferrowax-based microvalves. This device could be potentially used on site if an autonomous CCD platform similar to Ref. [24] would be adapted. Despite centrifugal microfluidics gaining attention in biomedical applications, companies fail to commercialize these products in the environmental sector due to the elevated cost of both, the disposable device and the platform.

As explained in section 2, microfluidic systems for water monitoring still lack realistic commercial applications due to the many challenges observed in each water matrix. As a common drawback, the low integrability and portability of these devices are mainly due to the use of conventional fluidic machinery. This makes current microfluidic systems very difficult to deploy in aqueous locations. We believe that the integration of novel miniaturized sensors, valves and pumps inside microfluidic devices could overcome this limitation.

3. Functional materials integrated into microfluidic devices

Even though microtechnology allows for the fabrication of small devices, the components needed for fluidic control (pumps, valves, mixing units) and detection are usually bigger than the device itself, reducing their applicability in real scenarios and limiting their commercial value [96]. Here is where functional materials, commonly named as smart materials, arise as suitable alternatives to conventional components for microfluidics, mainly as sensors and actuators.

Functional materials are stimuli-responsive materials, with an autonomous behavior in response to changes in their local environment. These behaviors are dictated by the functional groups present within their polymer chains. These materials can change some of their mechanical properties, such as shape or position, in response to a chemical change [97], magnetic field [98], electricity [99], pressure [100], or light [101] induction and variations in temperature [102], or humidity [103] being able to perform functions, by those external stimuli, without human manipulation, as actuators and fluid controllers. Moreover, if sensing functionalities are incorporated within these materials, they can be used as sensors [104], Table 2. Several groups are working on the integration of functional materials into microfluidic devices for water monitoring [105]. The use of functional materials under controlled laboratory conditions, exhibit integrability, and low-cost options compared to conventional materials. Some of these materials include the use of carbon nanotubes for the generation of actuators and for dielectric elastomers to create flexible electrodes [106]. Therefore, these new types of actuators, fluid controllers and sensors, with integrated
functional materials, have the potential to improve environmental analysis systems.

Stimuli-responsive materials present switchable chemical properties, mechanical strength, tuneable permeability and moldable surface characteristics, making them very suitable alternatives to conventional fluidic equipment [107]. The functional materials employed in microfluidics can be encompassed in metallic composites [108], hybrid materials [109], magnetic material [110], and polymeric materials [111]. These materials have the ability to change their shape, stiffness, position, natural frequency, damping, and/or other mechanical characteristics in response to a chemical, temperature variation, electric field, and/or magnetic field [112]. Hydrogels, being one of the first functional materials integrated into microfluidics, are three-dimensional structures of hydrophilic polymeric chains cross-linked into an insoluble, but also form highly hydrophilic swollen structures in water [96]. The nature of the monomers of the structure the functional groups and the crosslinker’s present, define the properties exhibited by the material. For example, shape-changing behavior may be due to volume expansion (and contraction) when a specific stimulus is applied. Hydrogel materials are evolving by changing the solvent used during synthesis from water to ionic liquids (ILs) in order to enhance their mechanical and hygroscopic properties. Ionic liquids are solvents more thermally and electrochemically stable than water, composed by cations (e.g. ammonium, phosphonium,imidazolium, or pyridinium) and anions (e.g. dicyanamide, chloride, or acetate), with a melting point below 100 °C and high flexibility [113]. By choosing the appropriate ion pair, the physicochemical properties of the IL such as viscosity, density, melting point and conductivity can be tuned to suit a particular need. The combination of an IL and a hydrogel component, such as organic [114], inorganic [115], or hybrid organic-inorganic [116] are called ionogels. For instance, when comparing the swelling behavior and the stability of hydrogels and ionogels, an enhancement of the properties of the material is found as a consequence of the incorporation of the IL in the structure of the gel [117–121]. Moreover, due to their low vapor pressure and their ability to plasticize the gel network, ionogels exhibit high resistance to cracking and drying, which renders them as attractive materials in soft actuators for microfluidic applications. Several applications have been already presented in the literature regarding ionogels in microfluidics, some of them out of the scope of this review [122,123]. Temperature-responsive materials have been the most widely studied for the creation of in situ devices, nevertheless, the need for heaters to induce actuation is an enormous drawback. Therefore, light irradiation, which allows for non-contact operation and possible independent and remote manipulation of multiple fluids, is becoming an alternative to generate actuators in microfluidic devices. To this end, many research groups have studied photo-responsive polymeric materials, mainly functionalized with azobenzene, leukochromophore and spiropenzopyran [124–127].

Table 2

| Material | Actuator/Fluid driver | Sensor |
|----------|----------------------|--------|
| Poly(N-isopropylacrylamide) (pNIPAAm) hydrogel | Light [94] | – |
| pNIPAAm ionogel | Temperature [148] | – |
| Poly-ionic liquid tributylhexylphosphonium sulfopropylacrylate (PSPA) | Temperature [144–147,152,154] | Colorimetry: Nitrates [27,173], pH [24] |
| Spiropyran hydrogel | Light [127] | – |
| Spiropyran ionogel | Light [161,162] | – |
| Graphene modified pNIPAAm | – | Electrochemical: pH [142] |
| Alginate hydrogel | pH [157,158] | – |
| Agarose hydrogel | – | Fluorescence: Nitrite [169] |

The natural evolution of functional materials has led to the recent incorporation of poly(ionic liquid) (PILs) hydrogels that are polyelectrolytes that feature a combination of IL monomers, connected through a polymeric backbone to form a polymeric architecture [113]. Although most research is focused on linear PILs, several reports are dealing with crosslinked PIL networks [128–133] used as membranes [134], electrolytes [135], sensors [136], and actuators [137–139] in microfluidic devices.

In the next section, the different functional materials will be introduced and linked to their type of actuation/sensing capabilities. In general, we will try to evidence that, by incorporating different stimuli-responsive materials, as actuators or sensors in microfluidic devices, the complexity of the device can be reduced when used for environmental applications, increasing their potential marketability. We will critically review the integration of functional materials into microfluidic devices, as actuators or fluid controllers and sensors, to eliminate external pumps and valves or to improve sensing capabilities. These materials will be cataloged by emphasizing their advantages when incorporated in water monitoring systems, which could lead to marketable devices. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that there is a wide range of functional materials to be investigated and exploited for the development of water monitoring systems. Here, we will present some of them, when integrated into microfluidic devices.

3.1. Actuators and fluid controllers in microfluidics

Traditionally, fluidic control in microfluidics uses pneumatic and hydraulic valves and pumps that require additional external equipment, reducing the portability and increasing the price of the final device. Nonetheless, by introducing functional materials as an alternative to conventional fluidic handling equipment, both portability and price reduction are accomplished, favoring commercialization. This section intends to review the different materials used as actuators and fluid controllers but not the actuator mechanism, which has been reviewed elsewhere [106,140].

As mentioned before, the temperature is widely used to generate actuators in microfluidic devices [141–143]. pNIPAAm is one of the most popular temperature-sensitive multifunctional hydrogels used in microfluidics [144–147]; however, none of these works reveals their applicability for environmental monitoring. pNIPAAm hydrogels, being a dynamic polymer, are controlled by electronic heating elements [148,149], magnetic fields [150,151], or light [152–154], introducing the necessity of external controllers that are not wanted in portable devices. Nevertheless, a drastic change in the volume of a material can be triggered by other stimuli, such as pH. Some authors have developed actuators that respond to changes in pH in a physiological range [155], or even actuators with combined responses [156]. Moreover, pH-sensitive hydrogels can also be used for other purposes, for instance, to control the bidirectional transport of reagents in microfluidic

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In particular, alginate hydrogels, which are networks of sodium alginate chains typically polymerized with Ca (II) ions, are biocompatible alternatives to be used as thermos-actuators in microfluidic devices for environmental monitoring [158]. Likewise, most of the ionogels used in microfluidic devices are based on the polymerization of pNIPAAm, using a variety of ILs [159]. These ionogels have been integrated into lab-on-a-disc as temperature responsive actuators [148,149]. Additionally, the swelling properties of ionogels can be employed for liquid flow control in paper devices when the ionogel is used as a passive pump [160].

Another strategy to solve the need for external pumping or mixing [125,126] is the introduction of spiropyrans in the pNIPAAm hydrogel [161]. Spiropyran is a photochromic organic compound whose structural change is induced by light and pH. The swelling/shrinking mechanism is reversible and tunable, allowing the control of the flow and mixing in microfluidics, Fig. 3C [162]. Additionally, the mechanism can be auto-induced by the copolymerization of spiropyran hydrogels with acrylic acid that introduces the necessary flow of protons needed for the reversion of the structure. Is remarkable to find out that, these types of materials were actuated for up to two months in a continuous mode without losing their properties [127]. Spiropyran-based hydrogels have been also implemented in centrifugal microfluidics for controlling fluid motion without the need for external equipment. A white light LED actuated the ionogel valve, making the valve shrink and allowing the fluid to flow while applying centrifugal forces [162]. In this regard, material robustness and actuation speed of the materials, used as actuators, is of high importance for the development of microfluidic analyzers for long-term deployment, Fig. 3D. Moreover, the reversibility of the swelling, the ability to absorb water [137] and the possibility of controlling flows, make these materials very interesting for the generation of valves and pumps in microfluidic devices for water control.

Therefore, considering the type of materials and publications on this matter, pNIPAAm is an exceptional material easily integrable into water analysis systems to improve valving capabilities and thus, reduce system dimensions and price. Additionally, the chemical tunability of the properties of this material might provide water analysis systems with the possibility of multiple actuation processes to control water samples and liquid reagents storage in the same device. Conversely, reversibility is still a challenge for polymeric pumps and valves being, at this point, less reproducible than external mechanical components. Nevertheless, these materials will be accepted as microfluidic components in commercial microfluidic devices, as long as their price and environmental impact becomes low enough to make the component or the full device disposable.

### 3.2. Sensors

The IUPAC defines a sensor as a device able to detect physical or chemical information and transforms it into an analytically useful signal. For that, three basic parts are required: an actuator that controls flows when a sensor is working, the sensor itself, that responds to the change in the environment and the transductor that recognizes this change and transforms it into an electric signal. Traditionally, electrodes, electric systems, or lasers have been used as transductors [163], increasing the size and final price of the sensors. The emergence of functional materials was a great advance for miniaturization and for lowering the costs of a sensor since they can act as both actuators and optical or electrochemical sensors themselves [164].

The ability of hydrogels to change shape by responding to an external stimulus such as pH or temperature is widely exploited for the fabrication of chemical [165] and optical [166] sensors. Hydrogel sensors consist of two main parts: a hydrogel element and a transducer in charge of converting the swelling signal of the hydrogel into an electrical (change in conductivity or current) or optical (change of fluorescence intensity, diffraction, or refractivity) domain [167]: this transducer can be incorporated into the hydrogel in the form of particles. For instance, conductive particles and materials such as graphene can be immobilized in hydrogels to be used as transducers, allowing the use of electrochemical methods [142,168]. In general, these types of microfluidic devices have been developed in the field of biomedicine and biotechnology [140]. Besides their responsive behavior, hydrogels are usually transparent, which is a useful feature for sensing colorimetric or fluorometric reactions. For example, hydrogels of agarose derivatives were used for the fluorescence detection of nitrate in different matrices, including water, see Fig. 4A [169], obtaining LODs in the order of μM. Although traditional methods can detect nM concentrations, this is a good example of a sensor that could be integrated into a microfluidic device for water analysis.

The flexibility of ionogels allows their integration into wearable devices [170]. Despite the historical toxicity of some ionic liquids in water [171], the overwhelming majority of ionogel sensors have been developed for biomedical and biotechnological applications due to their biocompatibility, flexibility, and similar properties to...
biological tissues [172]. In environmental monitoring applications, an ionogel was used by us for the detection of nitrate in water as a proof of concept, Fig. 4B [27,173]. The detection of nitrate was carried out using the Griess reaction. The system demonstrated the use of a portable microfluidic device with an ionogel matrix, for water monitoring. Another example of the use of ionogels for the monitoring of water was demonstrated in a lab-on-a-disc format for the simultaneous colorimetric study of the pH and turbidity of water, Fig. 4C [24]. On the other hand, PILs, although not have been fully implemented as sensors yet, have been broadly developed as redox modulated supercapacitors and for energy applications [136,138], thus their ionic structure makes them suitable as electrochemical sensors [139].

Although sensors based on functional materials have been already used for biomedical applications [174], they have not often been applied to environmental analysis, despite their great potential. This could have several explanations, on the one hand, the economic interest in environmental monitoring is lower than healthcare systems. On the other hand, traditional water analysis methods are part of the scientific community for so long, that the acceptance of these novel methods, based on microfluidics, will be difficult. Therefore, environmental agencies should validate and implement these devices before reaching the market. Strong collaborations between different disciplines in the LOC field, such as engineering, material science, biology and environmental chemistry are essential to take this technology from the laboratory to the market.

4. Conclusions

The increasing number of publications every year and their high quality demonstrate the great importance that microfluidic devices are acquiring in water monitoring.

Water is principally analyzed by traditional methods such as liquid chromatography and mass spectrometry despite the huge efforts adopted to incorporate microfluidics in environmental monitoring. Features like miniaturization of the analytical device, in situ analysis at the point-of-need, multiplexing, ease of manipulation and control of the device, and low-cost during device fabrication will soon bring microfluidics to the forefront of water monitoring research.

On the other hand, the use of microfluidic devices requires an in-depth study of functional materials and device implementation, to eliminate miniaturization engineering problems such as with valves, sensors, improving LODs and the possibility of multiple analyte detection. The incorporation of functional materials in microfluidic devices improves automation with novel actuators and sensors, minimizing the need for external bulky components. This will lead to the online, continuous, fast and inexpensive control and monitoring of water sources. Moreover, it will enable a faster and more adequate response to water contamination, even at the point-of-need.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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