The Electro-Optical Performance of Silver Nanowire Networks

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Networks of metallic nanowires have the potential to meet the needs of next-generation device technologies that require flexible transparent conductors. At present, there does not exist a first principles model capable of predicting the electro-optical performance of a nanowire network. Here we combine an electrical model derived from fundamental material properties and electrical equations with an optical model based on Mie theory scattering of light by small particles. This approach enables the generation of analogues for any nanowire network and then accurately predicts, without the use of fitting factors, the optical transmittance and sheet resistance of the transparent electrode. Predictions are validated using experimental data from the literature of networks comprised of a wide range of aspect ratios (nanowire length/diameter). The separation of the contributions of the material resistance and the junction resistance allows the effectiveness of post-deposition processing methods to be evaluated and provides a benchmark for the minimum attainable sheet resistance. The predictive power of this model enables a material-by-design approach, whereby suitable systems can be prescribed for targeted technology applications.

Modern photovoltaics, light-emitting devices, touch screens and thin-film transparent heaters all rely on a transparent conductor (TC) layer for operation. The most commonly used material for TCs has been ITO (tin-doped indium oxide), however, the brittle nature of the ITO film makes it incompatible with flexible device platforms1. Moreover, the scarcity of indium and the high cost of the ITO film deposition has motivated the search for alternative materials, which now includes conductive polymers2, carbon nanotubes1, graphene3, metal mesh5, crackle networks6 and networks composed of metallic nanowires such as Ag, Au and Cu7–9. Nanowire networks (NWNs) have demonstrated excellent optical, electrical and mechanical performances through low-temperature high-throughput fabrication techniques such as spray deposition10, Mayer rod coating11, and roll-to-roll slot die printing12. In particular, Ag NWNs can not only match the electro-optical performance of ITO, but can also fulfil the demands for the emerging flexible electronics market13. Next-generation devices such as flexible solar cells14, touch screens15, displays16, thin-film heaters17, wearables18,19 and anti-static coatings20 require flexible electro-optical components. Each TC film requires a high optical transmittance value (∙ > 90%) whereas the electrical requirements of the sheet resistance (Rs) is application-specific4. Figure 1 compares the current performance requirements of several proposed TC materials to ITO on a T-Rs curve against the backdrop of the requirements for a range of technologies. It is clear that Ag NWNs can fulfil the required optical and electrical performances for many technologies by tuning the Rs value. In the case of ITO, the optical and electrical properties are modulated by changing the film thickness21. For Ag NWNs, performance depends on the wire density (n_w), which, for the idealised case of a network made with wires of the same length and diameter is related to the junction density (n_j), the nanowire length (L) and a contact probability (P = 0.2027) through Eq. 1 below22.

\[ n_w = \frac{2n_j}{\pi L^2} \] (1)

The network Rs is ultimately controlled by the junction resistance (R_jxn) associated with overlapping Ag nanowires (NWs) in the network. R_jxn is a consequence of an electrically insulating few nm thick polyvinylpyrrolidone (PVP) layer that forms a metal-insulator-metal configuration where ever NWs overlap to form a junction23.

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Modification of the PVP surface layer can give resistive switching memory effects\textsuperscript{24,25}, or enhance the thermal and chemical stability of the Ag NWNs\textsuperscript{17,26,27}. PVP is necessary during the synthesis process and stabilises the nanowires in solution\textsuperscript{28}. Optimisation of the $R_{\text{jxn}}$ value in NWNs typically involves post-processing techniques such as thermal treatment\textsuperscript{29}, mechanical pressing\textsuperscript{30}, cold welding\textsuperscript{31}, optically induced welding\textsuperscript{32}, electrochemical Ostwald ripening\textsuperscript{33} or electrical stress-inducing\textsuperscript{34}, each of which can dramatically lower the $R_s$. However, in the absence of an electro-optical predictive tool, the effectiveness of these processing methods has been difficult to assess, compare and prescribe for specific applications.

We previously introduced a computational approach to describe the conduction properties of metallic NWNs using a multi-nodal representation (MNR) model which calculates the $R_s$ considering the contributions associated with NW junctions ($R_{\text{jxn}}$) and the NW segments (with inner resistances given by $R_{\text{in}}$) between them\textsuperscript{23}. One of the computational implementations for this model is available in the Supporting Information. Incorporating the inner-wire resistance (which depends on the NW material and diameter) is important but often overlooked. It allows the skeletal resistance of the network (in the limit when $R_{\text{jxn}} \rightarrow 0$) to be determined, for which the resulting network is comprised of ballistic NW junctions, representing the ultimate conductivity of the NWN\textsuperscript{23}. It is well known that increasing the NW length to diameter aspect ratio (AR) of the NWs results in lower $R_s$ values and a larger $T$\textsuperscript{35,36}. Thus far, electro-optical models of Ag NWNs have used empirical expressions to describe how $T$ depends on $R_s$ (which itself depends explicitly on material resistivity ($\rho$), $R_{\text{in}}$, $R_{\text{jxn}}$ and AR), approaches that typically require fitting parameters\textsuperscript{35,37,38}, or using other empirically sourced quantities to achieve agreement between experimental and simulated data\textsuperscript{13,20,39,40}. The $T$-$R_s$ curve has a characteristic shape, which was highlighted by Mutiso \textit{et al.}\textsuperscript{38} who fit an empirical expression with good agreement to a percolative model derived from thin-films\textsuperscript{40}. However, none of these semi-empirical approaches are predictive, nor can they accurately describe a wide range of NWNs.

In this work we use the Mie light scattering theory (MLST) of NWNs described by Khanarian \textit{et al.} to predict the transmittance as a function of the diameter of the NWs and the surface fraction coverage\textsuperscript{41}. MLST is an exact theory which has no fitting parameters and is only dependent on the wavelength of incident light, the NW diameter, and the optical constants of the NW material. We build upon the electrical MNR model by incorporating a first principles approach based on MLST of NWs to determine the electro-optical performance of the NWN. This fully predictive model establishes the limits of Ag NWN performance and faithfully captures the behaviour of experimental data from the literature over a wide range of NW ARs. Importantly, this tool can be used to engineer NW systems for different applications in a true materials-by-design approach, allowing an effective comparison of different NWN processing methods that will facilitate the adoption of NWN films in current and next-generation devices.

**Results**

The electrical performance of percolating NWNs depends significantly on the properties of the constituent NWs. Physical properties such as length and diameter determine the ultimate conductance potential of the network. The electrical performance of a Ag NWN was simulated using the MNR model for a given AR and wire density, setting $\rho = 22.6$ n$\Omega$m$^2$, and $R_{\text{in}} = 11$ $\Omega$ corresponding to the median value of the experimentally optimised distribution of junction resistances in Ag/PVP systems (see Fig. 2c)\textsuperscript{42}. For the purposes of simulation, the NWs were considered as rigid rods. Singular values of NW length and diameter were used in all computations, although the
MNR model is also able to account for more realistic aspects of networks, e.g. dispersion in physical parameters such as length, diameter, \( R_{\text{jxn}} \) and the presence of "outlier" junctions. Here, our goal is to avoid unnecessary complexity and show the raw capabilities of the model in describing and predicting real world performance without any fitting parameters; the flexibility of the model enables the incorporation of dispersion and other disorder elements in a straightforward fashion.

Figure 2(a) shows plots of the simulated Ag NWNs at a density of 0.1 NWs/\( \mu \text{m}^2 \) for aspect ratios (ARs) of 200, 400, 600 and 800 with nanowire (NW) diameter of 30 nm and a simulated cell size of 50 × 50 \( \mu \text{m} \); the respective transmittance (\( T \)) values are shown on each panel. (b) Average sheet resistance (\( R_s \)) as a function of the Ag nanowire network density for four AR values where the NW-NW junction resistance (\( R_{\text{jxn}} \)) is 11 Ω and the NW material resistance is included using the multi-nodal representation (MNR) model. The Ag NW diameter was fixed at 30 nm for all simulations, the error bars arise from the standard deviation of 10 simulated networks, the simulated cell size for the above ARs was 15, 30, 45 and 55 \( \mu \text{m} \), respectively. (c) For the highlighted density of 0.84 NW/\( \mu \text{m}^2 \) with AR = 200 in (b), the average \( R_s \) was calculated as a function of the \( R_{\text{jxn}} \) using the MNR model, and when the inner resistance is neglected from the calculations in the junction dominated approach (JDA). Below the main plot is a histogram of the experimentally measured \( R_{\text{jxn}} \) distribution of Ag NWs from Bellew et al.42.

Figure 2. (a) Representative plots of simulated wire networks at a density of 0.1 NWs/\( \mu \text{m}^2 \) for aspect ratios (ARs) of 200, 400, 600 and 800 with nanowire (NW) diameter of 30 nm and a simulated cell size of 50 × 50 \( \mu \text{m} \); the respective transmittance \( (T) \) values are shown on each panel. (b) Average sheet resistance \( (R_s) \) as a function of the Ag nanowire network density for four AR values where the NW-NW junction resistance \( (R_{\text{jxn}}) \) is 11 Ω and the NW material resistance is included using the multi-nodal representation (MNR) model. The Ag NW diameter was fixed at 30 nm for all simulations, the error bars arise from the standard deviation of 10 simulated networks, the simulated cell size for the above ARs was 15, 30, 45 and 55 \( \mu \text{m} \), respectively. (c) For the highlighted density of 0.84 NW/\( \mu \text{m}^2 \) with AR = 200 in (b), the average \( R_s \) was calculated as a function of the \( R_{\text{jxn}} \) using the MNR model, and when the inner resistance is neglected from the calculations in the junction dominated approach (JDA). Below the main plot is a histogram of the experimentally measured \( R_{\text{jxn}} \) distribution of Ag NWs from Bellew et al.42.
The flow diagram in Fig. 3 describes the implementation of the combined MNR and MLST models to simulate the electro-optical properties of NWNs. The only necessary inputs to the model are the NW diameter and length. The model then calculates the corresponding network density and determines the \( R \) given the values of \( \rho \) and \( R_{\text{ext}} \). Thus the model not only predicts the performance of a particular network but given experimental \( T \)-\( R \) data for a network of known \( D \) and \( L \) values it can predict the average \( R \) for such a network (at a specific value of \( T \)) to vary the \( R_{\text{ext}} \) value used in the MNR model, which, as previously discussed, can be influenced by different processing techniques. A discussion and analysis of previously reported, empirically derived, electro-optical models is presented in the Supplementary Information as Figs S1 and S2. This data shows that the MNR MLST model describes the expected shape of not only experimentally obtained \( T \)-\( R \) data, but can accurately describe the synthetic data generated from previously reported semi-empirical models.

Figure 4(a–d) shows the MNR calculated plots of the \( T \)-\( R \) for Ag NWs with various AR values and for mean \( R_{\text{ext}} \) values of 11 Ω, 100 Ω, 1000 Ω and in the case of perfect junctions with a resistance of 0 Ω. Each point in Fig. 4 was calculated by following the process outlined in Fig. 3 where \( \rho \) is fixed, and \( R_{\text{ext}} \) is varied. Figure 4(a) highlights the importance of optimising \( R_{\text{ext}} \) in the technologically relevant \( T \) region. It is important to note that when \( AR \sim 200 \) (Fig. 4(a,b)) at a \( T \sim 90\% \), the simulations predict that the \( R \) will be \(<100\,\Omega\). This is acceptable for touch screen applications, however, solar cells and OLED electrodes require much lower \( R \) (~10 Ω) which can only be achieved by \( R_{\text{ext}} \) optimisation (\( R_{\text{ext}} < 100 \) Ω) of highly transparent networks (\( T > 95\% \)). The truncation of the simulation in Fig. 4(c,d) is due to the prohibitive computational requirements to calculate sufficiently dense networks with \( T < 93\% \) for \( AR \sim 600 \) and \( T < 95\% \) for \( AR \sim 800 \) samples. The linear dependence of \( T \) with respect to the network density is plotted in Fig. S3, a dependence that is experimentally observed and has been theoretically derived by Ainsworth et al. In a physical NWN sample, it is impossible to probe individual \( R_{\text{ext}} \) values via experimental means. A strength of the MNR model is that it provides insights into the average contributions of the \( R_{\text{ext}} \) to the measured \( R \). By combining MNR and MLST models, we can begin to benchmark experimental data developing a materials-by-design approach to NWN-based TCs. Setting a theoretical benchmark for NWN systems allows a better comparison of synthesis methods, deposition procedures and specific post-processing techniques. For example, thermal annealing can hugely improve the \( R \) of as-deposited networks, but the anneal temperature and time must be chosen carefully and will depend on NW diameter and the thermal properties of the substrate. Figure 5(a) shows the improvement in the \( R \) by post-deposition annealing. Madaria et al. measured the performance of Ag NWs with \( AR = 166 \) pre and post anneal. The hollow square data points show the \( R \) before annealing the NWN films. The black squares show the marked decrease of the \( R \) after an anneal time of 20 min at 200 °C. The authors report the length and diameter values of the constituent NWs, which determine the densities of these networks (from Eq. 3) for the simulations. The MNR model can compute the electrical performance of these networks separating the \( R \) into the contributions of the wire material and the \( R_{\text{ext}} \) the latter being varied to obtain a good fit to the experimental data. The dotted blue curve shows the average \( R \) results that match the as-deposited NWNs with \( R_{\text{ext}} = 60 \) Ω. The width of the shaded coloured area represents both the horizontal component of the error from...
the standard deviation of the $R_s$ for 10 simulated networks, and the vertical spread in $T$ due to the uncertainty in the NW diameter value when calculating $C_{ext}$. After the annealing step, the $T$-$R$ curve is better described by $R_{jn} = 11 \, \Omega$, suggesting the annealing treatment has produced highly optimised TC films with extremely low $R_s$ for that particular AR. However, even at this optimised $R_{jn}$ value, the NWNs fail the $R_s$ requirement for photovoltaic applications and barely reaches the requirements for screen/lighting technologies (see Fig. 1).

Another example of NWN post-processing benchmarking is shown in Fig. 5(b) using the data from Liu et al.31. In their study, moisture-induced capillary-forces were shown to cause a self-limiting cold welding of the NW junctions, hence reducing the $R_s$. The hollow square data points show the $T$-$R$ data of the as-prepared samples. The effect of the moisture treatment significantly reduces the $R_s$ of the Ag NWNs and causes the network to adopt the “expected shape” curve which is an important indicator of the performance of the network as predicted by the MNR MLST models (cf. Fig. 4). We can apply the MNR MLST models to determine the $R_{jn}$ value needed to describe the network (comprised of NWs with AR = 222). The resulting blue shaded curve for the moisture treated samples has the expected $T$-$R$ shape, and is well described by $R_{jn} = 750 \, \Omega$. The failure of the as-prepared film to exhibit the same shape as the moisture treated samples suggest that the network connectivity is poorly established or that there is a significant spread in $R_{jn}$ values. The power of MNR MLST is that it can determine the $R_{jn}$ values necessary to describe the measured $R_s$ values in the as-prepared films - the spread is between 20 k$\Omega$ and 40 k$\Omega$ allowing a rapid evaluation of processing techniques used to form the network, which hitherto was not possible.

While it is obvious that moisture treatment has made a significant improvement to the measured $R_s$, it has not produced the most optimised NWN yet. MNR MLST can predict the effect of additional optimisation. By decreasing the $R_{jn}$ to a value of 11 $\Omega$ (red shaded curve, Fig. 5(b)), the simulations suggest further room for improvement. In-situ resistance measurements during thermal annealing for NWNs of a similar diameter suggest that an annealing temperature of 200 °C is required to realise the most conducting NWN films. Analysis of additional systems with AR = 182, 306, 440, 600, 641, 760, 800, 1000 and 2000 are shown in section 2 of the Supplementary Information confirming that our predictive model provides good agreement with experimental data. In some rare cases, MLST over-estimates the optical transmittance and, in some cases, MNR underestimates the $R_s$. A discussion of deviations from the model are included in sections 3 and 4 of the Supplementary Information. Other factors that can affect the electro-optical predictions of our model include the inherent

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**Figure 4.** (a–d) Calculated sheet resistance ($R_s$) for four aspect ratios (ARs) using the multi-nodal representation (MNR) and Mie light scattering theory (MLST) models for junction resistance ($R_{jn}$) values of 11, 100 and 1000 $\Omega$. Panels (c,d) have less points due to machine memory limitations. The error bars arise from the standard deviation of 10 Ag nanowire networks (NWNs) for each data point. The transmittance is calculated using Eqs 2 and 3 of the Mie theory method which is explained in the main text.
The flexibility of the NWs and the diameter dependent persistence length which is known to play an important role in the connectivity of the networks. At this point, for the sake of simplicity, our simulations only account for rigid rods and fixed persistence lengths. Nonetheless, the current model is flexible and can be extended to incorporate these elements.

Network optimisation can be graphically described by the combined MNR and MLST model. In Fig. 5(c,d), the $R_s$ is calculated as a function of the $R_{jn}$ for the data presented in Fig. 5(a,b) at $T = 95\%$. This linear relationship has been previously reported by our group when first implementing the MNR model and now serves as a roadmap for predicting the ultimate performance of NWN materials. The linear decrease in the $R_s$ assumes a decrease in the resistance of all junctions in the network, however in reality, some paths within the network may not be conducting initially and may require one of the processing steps previously discussed. As these additional paths become conducting, the simple linear relationship shown here may be curved or stepped. The two datasets in Fig. 5(a,b) (two further examples for AR 306 and 760 are presented in Fig. S18) initially had $R_{jn}$ which were predicted to be higher than the optimised value. The ability of the model to separately consider junction and inner-wire resistances allows for the ultimate performance of the NWN to be determined, which occurs when $R_{jn} \to 0\Omega$. This allows an estimate of how close a NWN film is to having perfect interwire contacts, and enables a rigorous and quantitative analysis of post-processing techniques. While the tunability of the $R_s$ in metallic NWNs...
via a combination of AR, NW density, material choice and $R_{\text{ext}}$ makes these materials attractive to numerous applications, the presence of a $R_{\text{ext}}$ between wires will always limit performance. Perfect lossless junctions may not be achievable in solution deposited NWNs but are a feature of seamless junction networks such as cracked template networks\(^\text{11,22}\).

### Conclusions

In this work, we combined two computational methods to deliver the first fully predictive model of both the electrical and optical performances of metal nanowire networks. The multi-nodal representation (MNR) model which calculates the sheet resistance ($R_s$) of the nanowire networks (NWNs) considers both the resistance contribution of the nanowire segments and the nanowire (NW) junctions. Using experimentally measured resistivity and junction resistance values for the case of Ag NWNs, we show how the $R_s$ depends on the nanowire length/diameter aspect ratio (AR). The inner-wire resistance is also important as it determines the lowest attainable $R_s$ and the inclusion of the skeletal resistance allows the magnitude of the junction resistance between overlapping wires, $R_{\text{ext}}$, to reveal the level of optimisation of the NWN through post-processing steps. The Mie light scattering theory (MLST) model describes the optical transmittance of NWNs according to its fundamental physical properties and network density. This simple but robust model achieves excellent agreement with experimental data over a wide range of NW ARs. The results of this work show that simulation of NWNs is an important tool in benchmarking the efficacies of post-processing methods, and offers a strategic approach to exploring the potential applications of NWN materials and guiding the synthesis of systems for specific needs. NWNs are well suited as replacements for ITO (tin-doped indium oxide) in a wide variety of current and emerging flexible devices. The development of a predictive model for these materials is an important step towards a materials-by-design approach for transparent conductor applications.

### Methods

MNR simulations were implemented in the Python language, the code for which is available in the Supplementary Information. The networks were generated according to the input parameters of wire diameter, wire length, wire density (number of wires per unit area) and simulation box length, which defines the squared area of the box where wires are randomly placed. The simulation box was always set larger than two times the wire length. Ag NW material resistivity is $\rho = 22.6 \, \text{n\,\Omega\,m}$, and the $R_{\text{ext}}$ varied according to the experiment. The MNR voltage grid scheme, which is described in detail in reference\(^\text{23}\) of the manuscript maps the spatial coordinates of the interwire connection points, and assigns either an interwire junction resistance $R_{\text{int}}$, or an inner-wire segment with a resistance calculated by $R_{\text{in}} = \rho l / A$, where $l$ is the length of the segment and $A$ is the cross-sectional area of the wire. The corresponding resistance matrix is solved using Kirchhoff’s circuit law to obtain the $R_s$ of the sample. The number of representative NWN samples of the ensemble was set to 10. The program output the average $R_s$ and the standard deviation of the $R_s$.

The $C_{\text{ext}}$ is calculated using the MatScat\(^\text{21}\) (Mie theory for infinite cylinders) implementation by Schäfer et al.\(^\text{34}\) and depends only on the NW diameter and the optical constants for the metal. The refractive index ($n$) and extinction coefficient ($k$) used for Ag is, $n = 0.13936$, $k = 3.5604 \, \lambda = 546 \, \text{nm}$\(^\text{55}\). From Equations 2 and 3, the NWN density corresponds to a $T$ value. $T$-$R_s$ data of NWNs across a wide variety of aspect ratios was gathered from 17 publications, where the NW lengths and diameters were reported. The $T$ values reported by these publications were converted into NWN densities which were calculated by MNR through the process outlined in Fig. 3. Where a spread in diameter values was reported, the upper and lower bounds described a variation in $C_{\text{ext}}$ and hence $T$ which is displayed as the shaded areas on the $T$-$R_s$ graphs.

### Data Availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article (and its Supplementary Information Files), the datasets are also available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Author Contributions

H.G.M. wrote the paper and performed the MNR and MLST simulations. C.G.R. and C.O’C. developed the MNR computational model and assisted with the MLST simulations. M.S.F. developed the computational model; and J.J.B. led overall effort. All authors discussed and commented on the manuscript and on the results.

Additional Information

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