Electrochemical charge storage in hierarchical carbon manifolds

Rajaram Narayanan, Hema Vijwani, Sharmila M. Mukhopadhyay, Prabhakar R. Bandaru

A Department of Nanoengineering, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA
b Program in Materials Science, Department of Mechanical and Aerospace Engineering, University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093, USA
c Center for Nanoscale Multifunctional Materials, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 45435, USA

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The use of hierarchical assemblies constituted from macroporous structures (e.g., reticulated vitreous carbon, RVC) where the internal pore area is covered with closely spaced nanostructures (e.g., carbon nanotubes, CNT) is proposed for substantially enhancing the energy density of electrochemical capacitors, while maintaining large charge/discharge rates. While the macroscale pores enable storage of substantial electrolyte volumes that would contribute through redox reactions to the energy density, the closely spaced nanostructures provide a large geometric area and capacitance in addition to enabling rate independent Faradaic charge storage via thin layer electrochemistry (TLE). A fifty fold increase in the double layer capacitance, in addition to increased Faradaic charge density with potential for orders of magnitude improvement, was observed for the RVC-CNT electrodes, in comparison to the bare RVC foam electrode. It was seen that the hierarchical assembly enables the contribution from ~94% of the net volume of the wetted RVC-CNT electrode for active Faradaic charge storage.

1. Introduction

The notion of bridging the high energy density inherent to battery systems with the large power density available in electrostatic capacitors, in a hybrid device, has been a worthy goal of energy storage [1,2]. While electrochemical capacitors (ECs) have been invoked as the intermediary devices, the energy density is yet an order of magnitude smaller than competitive battery systems relegating the ECs mostly to power intensive applications [3–5]. Typically, EC electrodes are comprised of activated carbon (AC) with a large specific surface area, SSA (of up to 2000 m²/g) available for electrostatic charge storage [6,7]. Recently, redox electrolytes in conjunction with AC electrodes have been proposed to improve the energy density of ECs [8–10]. Such electrolytes, in principle, could yield capacities comparable to that of batteries that use intercalation compounds such as transition metal oxides [11]. However, AC electrodes are not particularly suitable in conjunction with redox electrolytes as (a) their micro-porosity inhibits effective electrolyte penetration, and (b) they possess low specific pore volumes (of the order of 1 cm³/g) resulting in the low utilization of redox species dissolved in solution [12].

In this article, we aim to suggest an alternate scheme for enhancing the energy density of EC devices. The basis for a concomitant enhancement in the energy density, while maintaining power capability, hinges on the use of hierarchical assemblies constituted from porous structures where the internal pore area is covered with closely spaced nanostructures [13–17]. The rationale for the use of such assemblies is to incorporate both macroscale pores (e.g., of ~100 μm as in RVC) - which enable the storage of substantial electrolyte volumes that would contribute through redox reactions to the energy density, as well as nanostructures which provide a large geometric area and capacitance in addition to enhancing the rate of Faradaic processes, which is typically limited by species diffusion [18,19]. A relevant length scale, in this regard, is the equivalent diffusion layer thickness (d), over a given time (t), defined through:

\[ d \sim \sqrt{\pi D t} \]  

\( D \) is the diffusion coefficient of a relevant ion species [20]. When the nanostructure spacing or equivalent pore diameter (\( \delta \)) is smaller than the \( d \), conditions corresponding to thin layer electrochemistry (TLE) would be induced [21–23]. Battery-like energy...
densities may then be feasible through invoking TLE and Faradaic conditions in confined redox electrolytes, where the net obtainable charge would be proportional to the electrolyte volume \((V_{El})\) as well as the electrolyte concentration \((C_{El})\) by \(Q = nFV_{El}C_{El}\), where \(n\) is the number of electrons per redox reaction, and \(F\) is the Faraday constant \((= 96,485 \text{ C/mole})\). It should be noted that the underlying charge storage mechanism is not surface based, unlike traditional double-layer capacitors but is more related to the volume. Moreover, unlike batteries, the stored charge using such a scheme would possess the advantage of a large rate improvement, with large voltage scan rates.

2. Experimental section

2.1. Synthesis

The base porous structure is reticulated vitreous carbon (RVC) foam. It is commercially available from Ultramet Inc., and by itself had been earlier indicated as a promising electrode material for its macroscopic capacitance and high porosity. It is commercially available from Ultramet Inc., and by itself had been earlier indicated as a promising electrode material for its high porosity. Such a scheme was also deduced (on the basis of an average radius for an individual CNT of \(9\) nm and a height of \(25\) \(\mu\)m) as in RVC) enable the storage of electrolyte volumes that would contribute through redox reactions to the volumetric capacitance, from \(0.8\) mF/cm\(^3\) for the bare RVC sample to \(40\) mF/cm\(^3\), for the RVC-CNT hierarchical electrode was measured through the average of the cathodic current: \(I_c\), and the anodic current: \(I_a\), with \(V_i\) and \(V_f\) being the initial and final voltages of the CV scan, and \(m\) is the measured electrode mass.

3. Results and discussion

At the very outset, the pore size in the bare RVC foam and that corresponding to the spacing between the CNTs are three orders of magnitude apart [13]. The CNT surface area of the sample (per unit volume) was deduced based on the average radius for an individual CNT of \(9\) nm and a height of \(25\) \(\mu\)m, discussed previously) to be of the order of \(17\) m\(^2\)/g. Consequently, a factor of \(170\) \((= 17/0.1)\) increase was expected in the surface area due to the CNT assemblage for energy storage. While the macroscale pores (e.g., of \(~300\) \(\mu\)m as in RVC) enable the storage of electrolyte volumes that would contribute through redox reactions to the energy density, the nanostructures provide a large geometric area and capacitance in addition to limiting diffusion-related processes.

![Fig. 1](image_url) Bare reticulated vitreous carbon (RVC) foam (left) was used as a template for the internal growth of carbon nanotubes (CNTs); figures on the right, providing a hierarchical assemblage for energy storage. While the macroscale pores (e.g., of \(~300\) \(\mu\)m as in RVC) enable the storage of electrolyte volumes that would contribute through redox reactions to the energy density, the nanostructures provide a large geometric area and capacitance in addition to limiting diffusion-related processes.
However, while an ideal \( C_{dl} \) would be independent of the \( v \), it was noted that there was a gradual decrease of the \( C_{dl} \) at \( v > 1 \text{ V/s} \); Fig. 2(b), possibly due to Ohmic effects [30]. Additionally, the SSA was estimated to be \(-120 \text{ m}^2/\text{g}\), which is an order of magnitude lower than the state-of-the-art and indicates that \( C_{dl} \) of the RVC-CNT manifold alone would be inadequate for applications requiring high energy density [31]

We had previously discussed that the use of TLE conditions, incorporating Faradaic redox reactions, would enable a much more significant enhancement of the energy density through increased charge storage while maintaining a rate comparable to that of double layer capacitors [23]. While the relevant redox reaction: \( \text{Fe(CN)}_6^{4-} \rightleftharpoons \text{Fe(CN)}_6^{3-} + e^- \) would take place on the electrode/electrolyte interface, our investigations do not relate to surface phenomena specifically, but more to the prevalent TLE conditions. Fig. 3(a) indicates a representative voltammogram observed through the use of K₃Fe(CN)₆ (1 mM) in aq. KCl (1 M) on (a) RVC foam, and (b) RVC-CNT. In addition to the increased charge storage in the latter (evidenced by the larger peak currents), it was observed that the anode–cathode peak separation (\( \Delta E_p \)) was smaller (53 mV for the RVC-CNT vs. 174 mV for the bare foam). Typically, a \( \Delta E_p \) of less than \(-59 \text{ mV} \) is either indicative of TLE induced redox conditions or electrolyte adsorption on the surface [32]. The latter aspect was ruled out through transferring samples exposed to the K₃Fe(CN)₆ redox species to the bare electrolyte (1 M KCl), which resulted in a voltammetric response akin to that of a double layer capacitance without any redox peaks that could be associated with adsorption [23].

The redox peaks in the CV curves of Fig. 3 were analyzed for estimating the magnitude of the charge stored due to (i) the double-layer capacitance, as well as (ii) Faradaic reactions [33]. The results of such determination are depicted in Fig. 3(b) and indicate that while the former contribution is relatively constant with the \( v \), a sharp decrease was noted for the latter with \( v \). The double-layer charge is roughly constant at \( 40 \text{ mC/cm}^2 \). While the redox reaction induced charge seems to be of equivalent magnitude, it has the very important advantage that in principle the relevant charge density could be enhanced by orders of magnitude through the use of higher concentration redox electrolytes. For example, while 1 mM K₃Fe(CN)₆ was utilized in the present experiments, with the deployment of 1 M of redox couple, volumetric charge storage densities 1000 times larger could be obtained approaching battery-like capacities. Additionally, redox reactions involving multiple electron transfer would also help in further enhancing the capacity [34,35].

The net voltammetric charge (\( Q_{tot} \), as estimated from the CV plots is due to contributions from both (a) planar diffusion limited current at the top of the electrode (\( I_{diff} \)) as well as in pores with radii \( >> d \) (equivalent to \( \sqrt{\frac{D_{eff}}{4 \pi}} \)) and (b) a TLE current (\( I_{TLE} \)) in between the CNTs and in pores with radii \( << d \): Fig. 4 (a).
Quantitatively:

\[
Q_{\text{tot}} = Q_{\text{diff}} + Q_{\text{TLE}} = \int_{V_{\text{pore}}}^{V_{\text{f}}} \left( I_{\text{diff}} + I_{\text{TLE}} \right) dV
\]

\[
= FA_{\text{proj}} C_0 \left( \frac{\pi D F}{RT} \right)^{1/2} \int_{V_{\text{pore}}}^{V_{\text{f}}} \chi \left( \frac{FrV}{RT} \right)^{1/2} dV + F V_{\text{pore}} C_0
\]

In Eq. (3), the scanned potential window is within the lower limit of \( V_i \) and the upper limit of \( V_f \), and \( \chi \left( \frac{FrV}{RT} \right)^{1/2} \) denotes the normalized current for a reversible reaction under planar diffusion. It was noted that the consideration of the charge is preferred over the peak currents, as the latter are susceptible to Ohmic resistance related anomalies as well as the overlap of peaks from the diffusion and TLE related processes [36,37]. Additionally, the intercept of the observed plots-as in Fig. 4(b), of \( Q_{\text{tot}} \) with \( v^{-1/2} \) (i.e., \( F V_{\text{pore}} C_0 \)) would be related to the contributing pore volume (\( V_{\text{pore}} \)) in the given \( v \) range, and governed by TLE conditions [38]. Ideally, \( V_{\text{pore}} = V_{\text{ef}} \), implying complete utilization of the inner volume of the hierarchical manifold by the electrolyte.

As expected, it was observed that generally the Faradaic charge for the RVC-CNT electrode was larger than that of the bare RVC foam for the investigated \( v \). The variation with the \( v^{-1/2} \) was nonlinear indicating a range of length scales, which may be estimated through a piece-wise fitting of the curves. The extrapolation of such fits to \( a v^{-1/2} \rightarrow 0 \) would be representative of very large scan rates where diffusion would play a negligible role and the charge capacity would mainly arise from TLE conditions [38]. Generally, an overlap of the diffusion layers relevant to each CNT in an array occurs as the \( v \) decreases resulting in planar diffusion to the top of the electrode. However, inside the pores, a decreased concentration gradient results in thin layer behavior at lower \( v \), and more of the electrolyte volume can be accessed.

Consequently, from the intercept value (i.e., \( F V_{\text{pore}} C_0 \)), the relevant contributing volumes (\( V_{\text{pore}} \)) as well as the length scales may be determined. The results of such extrapolation are indicated in Fig. 5, where the ordinate indicates the percentage of the total volume of the RVC-CNT electrode that is being harnessed for charge storage. It was observed that at low \( v \), most of the charge is accessed through TLE mechanisms and close to 94% of the net volume of the wetted RVC-CNT electrode contributes. However, for the bare RVC foam, only \(-60\%\) of the net volume is active for charge storage.

Consequently, it may be surmised that the role of the CNTs synthesized within the RVC foam, in addition to increasing the effective surface area of the manifold, is to diminish the effective pore size of the native RVC foam and enable a greater access to the electrolyte volume. This may be seen through an application of Eq. (3), with \( D = 6.8 \times 10^{-6} \text{ cm}^2/\text{s} \) and \( v = 1 \text{ mV/s} \), yielding a \( d \approx 230 \mu \text{m} \). While the pore size \( (\delta) \) is of the order of \( 320 \mu \text{m} \), implying the absence of TLE conditions. However, with the growth of \( 25 \mu \text{m} \) long CNTs, the effective pore size \( (\delta) \) is reduced to \( 270 \mu \text{m} \) indicating a greater likelihood of achieving TLE in the RVC-CNT manifold and access to the enclosed electrolyte. It should also be noted that the presence of CNTs induce TLE conditions due to electrolytes trapped in between, resulting in enhanced mass transport in the circumferential direction. Given that the proof-of-concept experiments were done with \( 1 \text{ mM K}_3\text{Fe(CN)}_6 \), there is enormous promise for further enhancing the charge capacity, which is linearly proportional to the concentration of the redox species. For example, using redox additives with a greater solubility, e.g., KI, with a solubility limit of \(-8 \text{ M} \) may enhance the charge storage capacity potentially.
by a factor of 8000.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this work proposes the use of hierarchical porous manifolds for both large energy density - through redox electrolytes stored at a macro-pore level, and power density - using high surface area nanostructures. Such a scheme accomplishes the dual objectives of minimizing the issue of inadequate charge storage in electrochemical capacitors, and that of diffusional limitations, which limit the power of batteries.

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