Cryogenic Transmission Electron Microscopy Investigation of Carbon Nanothreads

Danielle Reifsnyder Hickey1, Stephen Juhl2, Arani Biswas3, Elizabeth Elacqua3, Vincent Crespi3, Timothy Strobel4 and Nasim Alem3

1Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, United States, 2DuPont, United States, 3Pennsylvania State University, United States, 4Carnegie Institution for Science, United States

The ability of the element carbon to form many types of chemical bonds enables it to exist as a variety of allotropes, including diamond, graphite/graphene, and fullerenes [1]. Recently, a new class of hydrocarbon materials has been discovered, called carbon nanothreads [2]. Nanothreads have been created by the controlled compression of aromatic molecules, such as benzene and its derivatives, and the resulting structure consists largely of one-dimensional sp3-bonded carbon networks saturated with hydrogen.

X-ray diffraction (XRD) and a variety of chemical characterization techniques have helped to establish the structure and bonding in nanothreads [2], but transmission electron microscopy (TEM) is uniquely able to determine the local, real-space structure [3]. XRD measurements show that benzene-derived nanothreads pack into a pseudo-hexagonal lattice, with a [10-10] spacing equal to 5.6 Å [2]. However, under the electron beam, damage occurs so quickly that even low-dose TEM conditions (5 e/Å²s) at room-temperature only capture images of an expanded lattice spacing of 5.9 Å after the initiation of beam damage in the lattice [4].

For this reason, analysis at cryogenic temperatures (cryo-TEM) is an attractive avenue to pursue. Here, we show that cryo-TEM has enabled the significant reduction of beam damage in carbon nanothreads. This allows the native structure of benzene-derived carbon nanothreads to be imaged successfully, both in real space and in diffraction mode. This presentation will show successes from using cryo-TEM and a comparison with high-resolution nanothread imaging at room temperature.

Nanothreads can also be synthesized with a variety of compositions, using benzene derivatives as precursors [5-8]. Recently reported precursors have included pyridine [5], thiophene [6], furan [7], and cocrystals [8,9]. Beyond what has been achieved for benzene-derived nanothreads, this presentation will further highlight recent results on the structural analysis via TEM of other nanothread chemistries.

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Figure 1. Cryo-TEM characterization of benzene-derived carbon nanothreads. (a) A representative cryo-electron diffraction pattern. (b) Low-dose cryo-high-resolution imaging (inset: FFT).

References