AlGaN/AlN integrated photonics platform for the ultraviolet and visible spectral range

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Abstract: We analyze a photonic integrated circuit (PIC) platform comprised of a crystalline AlxGa1-xN optical guiding layer on an AlN substrate for the ultraviolet to visible (UV-vis) wavelength range. An Al composition of x~0.65 provides a refractive index difference of ~0.1 between AlxGa1-xN and AlN, and a small lattice mismatch (< 1%) that minimizes crystal dislocations at the AlxGa1-xN/AlN interface. This small refractive index difference is beneficial at shorter wavelengths to avoid extra-small waveguide dimensions. The platform enables compact waveguides and bends with high field confinement in the wavelength range from 700 nm down to 300 nm (and potentially lower) with waveguide cross-section dimensions comparable to those used for telecom PICs such as silicon and silicon nitride waveguides, allowing for well-established optical lithography. This platform can potentially enable cost-effective, manufacturable, monolithic UV-vis photonic integrated circuits.

References and links

1. Introduction

Numerous applications stand to benefit from photonic integrated circuits (PICs) in the UV and visible (UV-vis) spectrum, including biochemical sensing, UV-Raman spectroscopy, beam steering, nonlinear optics, and quantum photonics. A PIC platform for this wavelength range requires wide bandgap materials to be optically transparent, and preferably crystalline to avoid excess optical absorption and unwanted autofluorescence at shorter wavelengths. In this context, crystalline III-Nitride semiconductors, with their wide bandgap and unique optical properties, are now reaching a degree of maturity to enable versatile PICs with the possible integration of laser sources and detectors [1–8] operating down to the UV spectrum.

Here, we analyze how the crystalline AlGaN-on-AlN material platform could be leveraged for UV-vis PICs. For this study we limit the UV wavelength to 300 nm for which experimental data of the refractive index of AlGaN is available, noting that in principle the platform has the potential to operate even down to ~250 nm wavelength for higher x in AlGaN. We consider a substrate consisting of a bulk c-wurtzite AlN wafer or a thick AlN epitaxial buffer on silicon, silicon carbide, or sapphire, and an AlGaN waveguide layer. The architectures use the same AlN platform for both AlGaN electronics and PICs. Table 1 summarizes the properties of AlN and GaN compared to other wide bandgap integrated photonic materials. Figure 1 shows a range of applications that can benefit from a UV-vis PIC platform.

A variety of III-Nitride waveguide structures have been studied for the visible/infrared spectra. A common structure consists of an epitaxial GaN waveguide grown on sapphire first
developed for GaN lasers [2] and later extended to infrared applications [12]. The large lattice mismatch (14%) and temperature expansion coefficient mismatch between GaN and sapphire results in large crystalline dislocation density for GaN which can contribute to optical loss. Another structure consists of a GaN waveguiding layer on a thick AlGaN cladding epitaxially grown on a substrate such as GaN or sapphire [13]. Because of the 365 nm bandgap of GaN, this platform does not extend to the UV. In addition, the AlGaN cladding layer needs to be thick (> 3 µm) to avoid leakage radiation to the underneath GaN substrate for visible wavelengths.

Table 1. Comparison of AlN and GaN with other UV bandgap integrated photonic materials*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Diamond</th>
<th>GaN</th>
<th>AlN</th>
<th>SiO₂</th>
<th>Si₃N₄</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>refractive index @ (\lambda) = 500 nm</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>2.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bandgap (nm)**</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>crystalline</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>electro-optic coeff. (pm/V)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>~1 -</td>
<td>~1</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thermo-optic coeff. (K(^{-1}))</td>
<td>10(^{-6})</td>
<td>1.6x10(^{-4})</td>
<td>3.6x10(^{-5})</td>
<td>10(^{-5})</td>
<td>2.5x10(^{-5})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thermal conductivity (W.m(^{-1}).K(^{-1}))</td>
<td>2200</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>active integration</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*: The data in this table are available in many references including Refs [1,9–11] cited here.
**: Above the bandgap wavelength, the material starts to become transparent.

There has been extensive work using sputtered AlN as the waveguide [9,14,15] on a SiO₂ cladding residing on silicon with promising low-loss results in the infrared (~1550 nm) [14] and a further excess loss at near-infrared (~780 nm) [15]. Since this AlN is amorphous, the waveguide is expected to show larger optical loss and unwanted autofluorescence at shorter wavelengths. Also, the large refractive index contrast between AlN and SiO₂ results in small cross-sectional dimensions (e.g. ~100 nm at \(\lambda\sim300\) nm) for single mode ridge waveguides, making their lithography difficult and exacerbating optical scattering losses. A recent work shows epitaxially grown AlN-on-sapphire waveguides [16]. Such waveguides suffer from a large lattice mismatch between AlN and sapphire (~13%) as well as large refractive index difference (~0.5). Other approaches include bonding of GaN to SiO₂ [17], as well as free-standing GaN membrane waveguides [18]. Another promising wide bandgap photonic platform that has been pursued is crystalline diamond on SiO₂ [10]. In this platform, diamond lacks active integration and efficient tuning capabilities (see Table 1), and its large refractive index contrast to that of SiO₂ makes waveguide dimensions very small in the UV.

In the Al\(_{1-x}\)Ga\(_x\)N-on-AlN architecture considered here, an \(x\sim0.65\) provides a sufficiently high index contrast (~0.1), transparency down to ~260 nm, small lattice mismatch ~1% with
potentially manageable low strain at the AlGaN/AlN interface, and single-mode waveguides with easy-to-fabricate dimensions comparable to telecom PICs made of silicon and silicon nitride [19,20]. The AlGaN waveguides can have cross-sectional dimensions of multiple wavelengths. This reduces the interaction of the optical mode with the waveguide sidewalls, and thereby can greatly reduce scattering loss from waveguide sidewalls. Moreover, the large mode-field diameter in the AlGaN waveguide is convenient for waveguide edge-coupling.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the AlGaN waveguide structure and its refractive index contrast with respect to AlN. Sections 3 and 4 analyze the mode properties of AlGaN waveguides and bends, respectively; Section 5 discusses AlN as a substrate for a wafer scale photonic platform and its challenges; and Section 6 summarizes.

2. Waveguiding structure and refractive index of Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N

Consider the ridge waveguiding structure shown in Fig. 2(a). The waveguide consists of an Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N ridge on a pedestal of AlN of height $h$ on the AlN substrate. This pedestal reduces bending losses (see Sect. 4). The overcladding material, depending on the application, can be air or any other wide bandgap and transparent material such as water or SiO$_2$ that have a refractive index lower than that of AlGaN. The Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N alloy has a bandgap from ~3.42 eV (~365 nm) for $x = 0$ to ~6.2 eV (~200 nm) for $x = 1$. To keep the lattice mismatch at the AlGaN/AlN interface below 1% and attain a large UV bandgap, we assume $x \leq 0.65$ as indicated in the pink region in Fig. 2(b). Though increasing the $x$ reduces the refractive index difference between Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N and AlN, we will show that adequate optical mode confinement is available for the waveguides.

![Fig. 2. (a) cross section of the Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N waveguide discussed here. (b) Variation of Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N/AlN lattice-mismatch vs. $x$. The top horizontal axis shows the bandgap of Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N in the wavelength unit for each $x$ value.](image)

![Fig. 3. Plots of the refractive index difference between the Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N and AlN for (a) ordinary and (b) extraordinary indices with the $x$ values and lattice mismatches shown in the inset of (a).](image)
Figures 3(a) and 3(b) show the refractive index difference for both ordinary ($\Delta n_o$) and extraordinary ($\Delta n_e$) directions between the Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N and AlN at four values of $x \geq 0.65$ (see Appendix section on the refractive index of AlGaN). For $x = 0.65$, $\Delta n_o \sim 0.090-0.12$ and $\Delta n_e \sim 0.090-0.14$ over a wavelength range of 300 nm – 700 nm. The values of $\Delta n_o$ and $\Delta n_e$ will approximately determine the guided-mode confinement for the transverse-electric (TE) and transverse-magnetic (TM) polarization modes, respectively.

3. Results of photonic waveguide analysis

For the simulation of the modes of the waveguide shown in Fig. 2(a) we choose the popular aspect ratio of $W = 2.5 H$ and consider two cases of $h = 0$ and $h = H/2$. We choose SiO$_2$ as the overcladding for the simulation. The results would not change much if we had selected air or water overcladding because the refractive index of these three materials are much smaller than that of AlGaN, and so the waveguiding condition is mainly governed by the AlGaN/AlN refractive index difference.

Figures 4(a) and 4(b) show a map of the simulated TE and TM modes for an Al$_{0.65}$Ga$_{0.35}$N waveguide. A broad optical spectrum from 300 to 700 nm is guided by varying the waveguide $W$ and $H$. The regions of single-mode, multi-mode, and mode cut-off are given in Fig. 4(a) and 4(b). The colormaps represent the power confinement factor in the core of the waveguide. From these figures we see that single mode propagation and strong mode confinement are possible for $\Delta n \sim 0.1$ (for $x = 0.65$, see Fig. 3). The TE polarization [Fig. 4(a)] is guided over a narrower wavelength range than the TM polarization [Fig. 4(b)] because of a smaller in-plane refractive index difference $\Delta n_o$ than the out-of-plane refractive index difference $\Delta n_e$. The insets in Fig. 4(a) and 4(b) show the optical power-density mode profiles, corresponding to the point marked by the star in Fig. 4(a) and 4(b).

![Fig. 4. Simulated guided-mode map for an Al$_{0.65}$Ga$_{0.35}$N waveguide with the general structure shown in Fig. 2(a) when $W = 2.5 H$ and for the following cases: (a) TE polarization, $h = 0$, (b) TM polarization, $h = 0$, (c) TE polarization, $h = H/2$, (d) TM polarization, $h = H/2$. In each figure, the colormap represents the power confinement factor in the core of the waveguide. The regions of single-mode, multi-mode, and cut-off have been highlighted. The colorbars for each figure correspond to the colormap data. The insets in a-d show the waveguide mode intensity profile corresponding to the white star marker in the guided-mode map.](image-url)
We repeat the waveguide analysis for a finite-thickness pedestal (h>0). Figures 4(c) and 4(d) again show broadband waveguiding, for the TE and TM polarizations, respectively and for h = H/2. The guided modes are similar for h = 0 and h = H/2 as seen from the results in Fig. 4, but the finite pedestal thickness reduces radiation in waveguide bends, as discussed in Section 4.

We repeat these simulations for Al$_{0.75}$Ga$_{0.25}$N waveguides under the TE and TM, W = 2.5H, and h = 0 or H/2 constraints (not shown). Simulations for x = 0.65 and x = 0.75 provide a straight-line approximation to the single-mode condition as $W = \alpha \lambda + \beta$ (where $\lambda$ is the wavelength and $\alpha$ and $\beta$ are constants) that allows direct comparison of $W$(single-mode) vs. $\lambda$. Figure 5 plots these lines that delineate single-mode conditions of AlGaN waveguides in the UV-vis range.

To show that a small refractive index difference between AlGaN and AlN is very beneficial for waveguide design at shorter wavelength, we simulated the guided modes at a UV wavelength of 300 nm for various waveguide heights (H) and widths (W). Figure 6(a) and 6(b) show the results for the TE and TM polarizations respectively. From these results and for a single mode condition, the waveguide dimension are comparable to those used for Si waveguide at telecom wavelengths, thereby, the lithography of these UV waveguides is possible with existing photolithography technology.

The passive waveguides considered thus far could be modified for electro-optical modulation through the Pockels effect or carrier injection/depletion [21]. The Pockels coefficient of AlGaN is expected to be close to that of AlN (~1 pm/V [9]), though it may be
increased by strain engineering. A reverse-biased PIN diode across intrinsic AlGaN would induce Franz-Keldysh electro-absorption modulation at photon energies ~50 meV below the band edge [22].

4. Analysis of the bend loss

To analyze bending losses, we simulate optical resonances of circular Al0.65Ga0.35N microring resonators on an AlN substrate and find their radiation-limited quality factor ($Q_r$). The simulations are for TE-like modes near a wavelength of 300 nm. We find $Q_r$ using the relation $Q_r = \omega_r/(2\omega_i)$ where $\omega_r$ and $\omega_i$ are the real and imaginary part of the resonance, respectively.

Figure 7(a) plots the simulated $Q_r$ for two pedestal thicknesses of $h = 0$ and $h = H/2$. The results in Fig. 7(a) show that compact resonators with high Q factors can be obtained for a small refractive index difference between Al0.65Ga0.35N and AlN (see Fig. 3 for the refractive index data). For $h = H/2$, $Q_r$ is consistently higher and permits high Q factors for radii below 5 µm. Figures 7(b) and 7(c) show the cross section mode profiles for the electric field in the radial direction for a radius of 15 microns and for two cases of $h = H/2$ and $h = 0$, respectively. Figure 7(d) shows the roundtrip bending loss of the resonators simulated in Fig. 7(a). The roundtrip loss in dB scale is $10 \log_{10}(e^{-\alpha R})$ where $R$ is the radius and $\alpha$ is the propagation loss per unit of length, and is related to $Q_r$ as $\alpha = 2\pi n_g/(\lambda Q_r)$, where $\lambda$ is the wavelength and $n_g$ is the group index of the optical mode.

From the results in Fig. 7 we can conclude that compact and low loss bends can be designed. Although the resonator simulations in Fig. 7 are for an Al0.65Ga0.35N with $x = 0.65$, compact resonators can be still obtained by higher or lower $x$ values (e.g. $x = 0.7$, or $x = 0.6$).

5. AlN as a substrate

C-axis AlN wafers are cut from a wurtzite single-crystal AlN boule grown by proprietary methods [23–25], and their UV transparency depends upon the crystal quality. The largest AlN boules grown to date have 50 mm diameter, and 32 mm diameter is available commercially [24]. A current challenge is to reduce the crystalline dislocation density in AlN. State-of-the-art single crystal growth of AlN produces dislocation densities below 1000/cm², and selected areas can have <100 defects/cm² [24]. In the present art, AlN wafers show an absorption of less than 15 cm⁻¹ over the 230 to 700 nm wavelength range, and less than 8 cm⁻¹ for the 510 to 700 nm wavelengths [23]. These optical absorption results are promising and can be further improved by advancing the crystal growth techniques. A possible approach
to further reduce dislocations near the AlGaN waveguide layer is to epitaxially grow a buffer layer of AlN on this AlN wafer before growing AlGaN.

A near-term approach for large-scale wafers of AlGaN films is to use substrates of SiC, Si [26], or sapphire [27] with an optically thick, epitaxially grown spacer layer of AlN. Figure 8(a) shows a waveguiding structure in this platform. The lattice mismatch between the AlN and these aforementioned substrates determines the dislocation density at the lower AlN surface. Figure 8(b) summarizes the lattice mismatch between AlN and the potential growth substrates. With recent advances in growth techniques [8], the growth of an AlN spacer layer with minimal dislocation density on these substrates is possible.

With a small lattice mismatch (<1%) between the AlN and AlGaN for the geometries studied here, reducing the crystalline dislocations of AlGaN is foreseeable by proper strain engineering. Recent works on the epitaxial growth of GaN on Sapphire with a lattice mismatch of ~14% show a dislocation density ~10^8/cm^2 (i.e. 1/µm^2) [12]. The defect density in the AlGaN-on-AlN architecture with <1% lattice mismatch should be much smaller, potentially allowing for zero dislocations across ring resonators with areas on the scale of tens of µm^2.

6. Conclusions

Al_xGa_{1-x}N-on-AlN is a promising platform for photonic integrated circuits for wavelengths 250nm-to-700nm in the UV-visible range. An Al content x~0.65 results in ~1% lattice mismatch at Al_xGa_{1-x}N/AlN interface and a refractive index differences of ~0.1 between these two layers. The latter results in a large single-mode waveguide cross section of multiple wavelengths, relaxing lithographic tolerances and likely lowering scattering losses. In particular, we present single-mode waveguide designs for TE_o and TM_o modes for 300 - 700 nm wavelengths. We also show that the platform enables compact and high Q resonators, and correspondingly low loss bent waveguides. With a ~1% lattice mismatch between AlGaN and AlN we expect smaller dislocation densities, though the relationship between interface dislocations and optical losses is not presently clear and will need to be explored experimentally. The presented single-crystal UV-vis photonics platform would enable a range of applications including sensing to quantum information science and optical communications.

7. Appendix

Early works on the measurements of the refractive index of Al_xGa_{1-x}N showed large discrepancy, though later measurements converged [11,28–30]. From our thorough investigation among the more recent works, we considered those of [28] and [29] as they measured both ordinary and extraordinary refractive indices of Al_xGa_{1-x}N for high x values and their results were used or validated in later works [11]. While the data in [29] are for selected x values, the data in [28] cover the complete range from x = 0 (GaN) to x = 1 (AlN).
We estimated the ordinary and extraordinary refractive indices of Al$_x$Ga$_{1-x}$N from the Sellmeier expression in [28]:

$$n(\lambda)^2 = 1 + \frac{A_x \lambda^2}{\lambda^2 - L_1^2}, \quad (A_o = B_0 + B_1 x, \quad L_0(x) = C_0 + C_1 x + C_2 x^2), \quad (1)$$

where $\lambda$ is the wavelength of light in nm. Table 2 shows the coefficients used in the above expressions ([28]). Since these coefficients had a large tolerance range, we adjusted them within their range by matching Eq. (1) with the refractive index results in [29].

Although the measurements in [28] and [29] started from a wavelength of ~ 440 nm, we have extended Eq. (1) to 300 nm, and to validate this, we compared Eq. (1) to [30] that measured the refractive index of AlGaN down to 300 nm. In [30] a net refractive index for AlGaN was reported as their apparatus did not distinguish between the ordinary and extraordinary indices. This comparison showed similar dispersion behavior for the AlGaN refractive index. In addition, the refractive index difference between AlGaN and AlN is similar from Eq. (1) and [30] (for our guided-mode studies, the $\Delta n$ is more relevant than the absolute values of indices).

### Table 2. Coefficients used for the refractive index expression in Eq. (1) [28]. The numbers in the parentheses are the ones that we selected to match Eq. (1) with the the data in [29].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Ordinary index ($n_o$)</th>
<th>Extraordinary index ($n_e$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$B_0$</td>
<td>4.1446 ± 0.0146 (4.1446)</td>
<td>4.2957 ± 0.0165 (4.2957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$B_1$</td>
<td>-1.0021 ± 0.0273 (-1.0021)</td>
<td>-0.9817 ± 0.0310 (-0.9817)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$C_0$</td>
<td>190.719 ± 2.48 (190.719)</td>
<td>191.71 ± 2.23 (191.71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$C_1$</td>
<td>-82.999 ± 12.363 (-75)</td>
<td>-76.363 ± 11.142 (-75)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$C_2$</td>
<td>27.521 ± 11.619 (37.521)</td>
<td>23.427 ± 10.471 (25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Funding


### Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge Dr. Norman Sanford of NIST for the discussion on the refractive index of AlGaN. We thank Drs. Abbas Torabi, Brian Schulz, and Ram Chelakara from Raytheon Integrated Defense Systems, and Dr. Noelia Trivino from MIT for the discussions on III-Nitride technology. MS acknowledges the partial support from DARPA under the contract W31P4Q-15-C-0045. RS thanks the AFOSR for support on grant FA9550-14-1-0196. TP acknowledges the partial funding the support from the ONR PECASE program, monitored by Dr. Paul Maki. DE acknowledges support from Cooperative Agreement No. FA8750-16-2-0141 from the air Force Research Laboratory, as well as partial support from the MIT GaN Energy Initiative. This document does not contain technology or technical data controlled under either the U.S. International Traffic in Arms Regulations or the U.S. Export Administration Regulations. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as representing the official policies, expressed or implied, of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the U.S. Army, or the U.S. Government.