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# THz Devices Based on 2D Electron Systems

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In two-dimensional electron systems with mobility on the order of 1,000 – 10,000 cm<sup>2</sup>/Vs, the electron scattering time is about 1 ps. For the THz window of 0.3 – 3 THz, the THz photon energy is in the neighborhood of 1 meV, substantially smaller than the optical phonon energy of solids where these 2D electron systems resides. These properties make the 2D electron systems interesting as a platform to realize THz devices. In this paper, I will review 3 approaches investigated in the past few years in my group toward THz devices. The first approach is the conventional high electron mobility transistor based on GaN toward THz amplifiers. The second approach is to employ the tunable intraband absorption in 2D electron systems to realize THz modulators, where I will use graphene as a model material system. The third approach is to exploit plasma wave in these 2D electron systems that can be coupled with a negative differential conductance element for THz amplifiers/sources/detectors.

## 1. GaN Based HEMT Devices Towards THz

GaN HEMTs provide a high two-dimensional electron gas (2DEG) density in the order of 10<sup>13</sup> cm<sup>-2</sup> due to strong polarization effects and a modest electron mobility up to 2200 cm<sup>2</sup>/V·s, which results in an output current density over 4.0 A/mm [1] and in turn a high output power density at a large supply voltage. Moreover, the GaN-on-SiC integration manifests an excellent substrate thermal conduction, which is beneficial to reduce packaging and cooling costs. These features of GaN enable promising power amplifications with high power added efficiency in cellular devices, base stations, wireless networks and defense systems.

Based on the definition of  $f_T$ , the frequency when the short circuit current gain  $h_{21}$  reaches unity, and the device small signal equivalent circuit analysis (Fig. 1), one can extract an analytical expression for  $f_T$  or the total delay time  $\tau_{tot}$  as a function of equivalent circuit parameters as follows:

$$f_T = \frac{1}{2\pi\tau_{tot}} = \frac{g_m / 2\pi}{(C_{gs} + C_{gd})[1 + (R_s + R_d)/R_{ds}] + g_m C_{gd}(R_s + R_d)}, \quad (1)$$

in which  $g_m$  represents the intrinsic transconductance,  $C_{gs}/C_{gd}$  the gate-to-source/drain capacitance (the sum of both intrinsic denoted as  $C_{gs,int}$  and extrinsic as  $C_{gs,ext}$ , same for  $C_{gd}$ ),  $R_s/R_d$  the source/drain resistance, and  $R_{ds}$  of the channel output resistance. The total delay time  $\tau_{tot}$  can be further divided into two components: intrinsic delay time  $\tau_{int}$  and parasitic delay time  $\tau_{par}$ , expressed as:

$$\tau_{int} = (C_{gs,int} + C_{gd,int})/g_m = L_g/v_e, \quad (2)$$

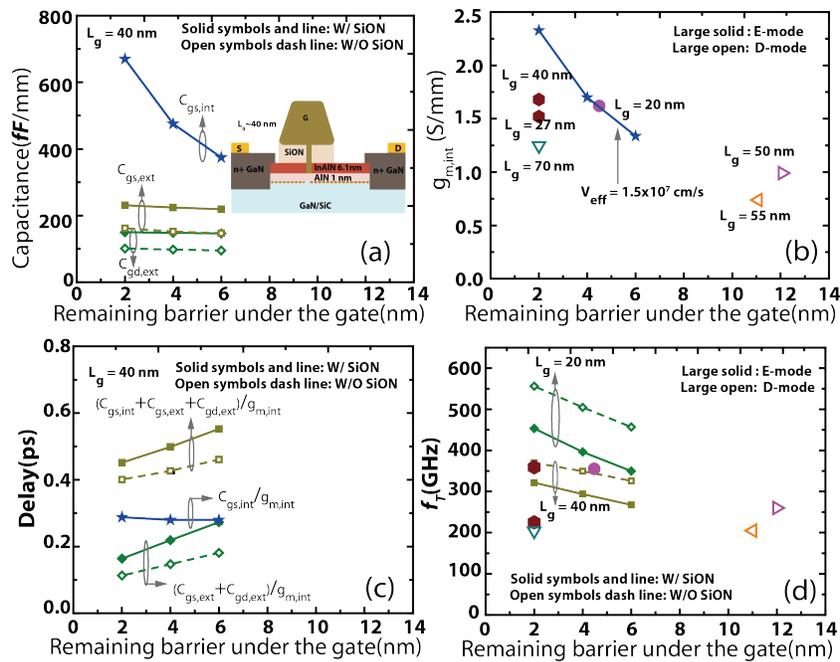
$$\tau_{par} = (C_{gs,ext} + C_{gd,ext})/g_m + C_{gd}(R_s + R_d) + (C_{gs} + C_{gd})(R_s + R_d)g_{ds}/g_m, \quad (3)$$

in which  $L_g$  represents the gate length, and  $v_e$  the effective electron velocity.



advanced technologies, InAlN HEMTs with a rectangular gate length of 30-nm and regrowth ohmic have shown record  $f_T$  up to 400 GHz shown in Fig. 2 [9] and comparison with the state-of-the-art high speed device in GaN based device and other III-V HEMT [10].

With the continual scaling in both  $L_g$  and  $L_{ds}$  down to sub-100nm regime and optimization of the parasitic, the devices speed is limited by the parasitic delay, ultimately by the first term of Eq.1 associated with the extrinsic capacitance ( $C_{gs,ext}+C_{gd,ext}$ ) and  $g_m$  [11]. The extrinsic capacitance, dependent on the device geometry and passivation (both thickness and dielectric constant), would not scale down with  $L_g$ . Shown in Fig.3(a) and (b), the extrinsic capacitance exhibits weak dependence on gate recess, while the intrinsic capacitance and  $g_m$  scale inversely with the remaining recessed barrier thickness. This means that the intrinsic delay is independent of recess depth while the parasitic delay decreases with the reducing remaining barrier thickness since  $g_m$  increases. Thus, the device speed increases with more aggressive gate recess, provided the  $v_{eff}$  is not affected by the recess etch. It is  $(C_{gs,ext}+C_{gd,ext})/g_m$  that defines the ultimate speed limit after both  $L_g$  and  $R_{on}$  scale down to zero in theory. Therefore, maximizing  $g_m$  is key to obtaining terahertz transistors. This is consistent with the observation that InGaAs-channel HEMTs exhibit higher speed than GaN or Si based FETs. To further improve the GaN HEMT speed, it is paramount to seek approaches that enhance injection velocity thus  $g_{m,int}$ , such as the use of InGaN [12] or isotope-disordered channels [13].



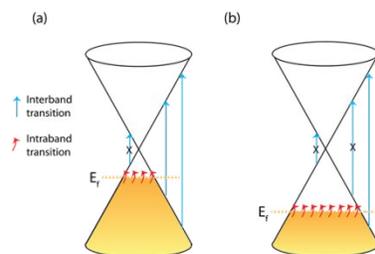
**Fig. 3** Calculated performance of GaN HEMTs with a gate stem height of 200 nm, recessed gate and a thin barrier shown in the insert of Fig (a). For a gate length of 40 nm, (a) extrinsic and intrinsic capacitances, (b) estimated intrinsic  $g_m$  and reported values, and (c) delays. The intrinsic delay stays the same (SCEs neglected), the extrinsic delay decreases purely because of the enhancement in  $g_m$ . (d) Projected  $f_T$  for devices with  $R_s/R_d$  of 0.11/0.18  $\Omega \cdot \text{mm}$  and two gate lengths: 20 and 40 nm. Also shown are  $g_{m,int}$  and  $f_T$  values of several reported high performance E-mode GaN HEMTs with T-gate and  $f_T > 200$  GHz (large solid symbols) [reproduced from Ref.10].

Aggressive gate length scaling and optimization of GaN HEMT has led to impressive progress reaching device speed about 400 GHz. The extrinsic delay is found to be a significant factor in limiting the speed in ultra-scaled GaN HEMTs, and is fundamentally determined by the device

intrinsic  $g_m$  and the fringing capacitance between the gate stem and the access regions. Thus improving  $g_m$  by enhancing injection velocity with further gate-length scaling is key in realizing GaN THz devices.

## 2. Graphene Based THz Modulators

The awarding of Nobel Prize in 2010 acquaints the world with graphene. As a single sheet of carbon atoms arranged in hexagonal structure, graphene possesses unique physical properties that are hardly seen in traditional semiconductors, which stimulates tremendous amount of interests in both scientists and engineers [14-18]. Thanks to the significant progress in large-area mass production of graphene by chemical vapor deposition (CVD) [19-21] in recent years, the applications of graphene have been expanded to a variety of aspects. The very unique combination of high electric conductivity and optical transparency makes graphene an appropriate candidate for transparent conducting electrodes. Comparing to the commercial indium-tin-oxide (ITO), graphene is much more favorable considering its excellent mechanical strength, tenability, flexibility, low-price and facile integration. Technologies such as touch screen, solar cells, light-emitting diodes, liquid crystal displays etc all have the needs of transparent electrodes which can be replaced by graphene. In this work, we demonstrate one novel function of graphene as transparent electrode in internal photoemission spectroscopy (IPE) for the first time [22-24].

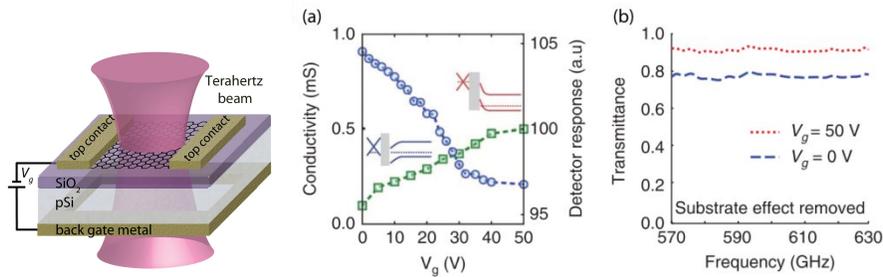


**Fig. 4** (a) and (b) Band diagrams of graphene with two different Fermi levels showing the interband (blue arrow) and intraband (red arrow) transitions. In THz range, intraband transition dominates due to the small photon energy required. As Fermi level goes further from Dirac point ((a) to (b)), states of free carriers available for intraband transition increases.

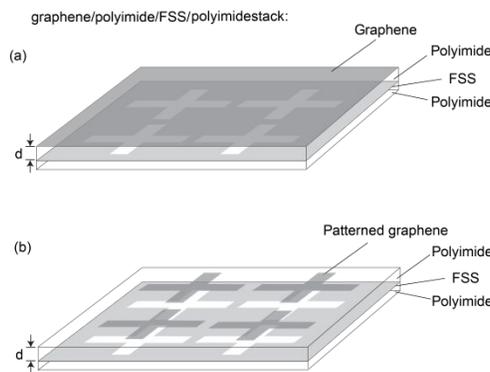
However, that's not the whole story. Recently, our group showed the terahertz (THz) wave transmission through the graphene layer can be electrically tuned by varying its Fermi levels [25-27]. It is amazing that a layer of carbon atoms with the thickness 1000,000 times smaller the wavelength can so efficiently modulate the electromagnetic waves. In visible range, graphene exhibits flat transmission spectrum of 97%, which is almost independent its Fermi levels [28]. On the contrary, in THz range, intra-band carrier transition dominates due to the low incident photon energy, resulting in a Fermi level dependent transmittance [29,30]. As shown in Fig. 4, the available states that could induce THz absorption is larger while the Fermi level stays further from the Dirac point. Therefore, such intraband absorption based THz modulation could be readily realized by tuning graphene's Fermi level with various approaches. Previously, several types of modulators in THz range have been proposed and demonstrated. For example, HEMT-like device with a 2DEG layer between GaAs/AlGaAs interface could modulate THz transmission by 3% by tuning the electron density [31]. Another strategy is to apply metamaterials to concentrate waves into a doped GaAs layer [32, 33]. By depleting carriers in GaAs beneath the split gap of metallic structure by applying biases, THz transmission is enhanced due to the less absorption by free carriers. In addition, MEMS-based reconfigurable mesh filters are recently explored [34]. Despite the superior modulation depth (>70%), the operation speed is rather slow (20 KHz) hindered by the mechanical control of the system. In

comparison, graphene based THz modulation possess advantages of large modulation depth, high speed, and facile fabrication procedure [35].

As the first experimentally demonstrated graphene-based THz modulator, our proof-of-concept device employs a graphene-SiO<sub>2</sub>-Si structure as shown in Fig. 5, to tune the THz wave transmission by applying a voltage between the top contact and the back gate metal [25]. A 1.5 x 1.5 cm<sup>2</sup> monolayer graphene layer grown by CVD on Cu foil was transferred onto a 300 nm SiO<sub>2</sub> covered Si substrate. To avoid the free carrier loss induced by the substrate, a lightly doped p-type Si wafer is used. Then top and backside contacts were deposited by e-beam evaporation. Figure 5a shows the DC conductivity (blue circles) and the detector response (green squares) at 600 GHz, where it could be clearly seen that transmission increases with decreasing DC electrical conductivity as expected. Because the Dirac voltage is  $\geq 50$ , so it could be inferred that the graphene is p-type in all the range of scanned gate voltage from 0 to 50V. The transmission spectrum at two gate voltage values after removing the substrate oscillation effects is shown in Fig. 5b. The flat transmission characteristic of this modulator promises the intrinsically broadband operation. Modulation depth (MD) defined as  $(T_{\max}-T_{\min})/T_{\max}$  could be calculated to be  $15\pm 2\%$  over the entire spectrum.



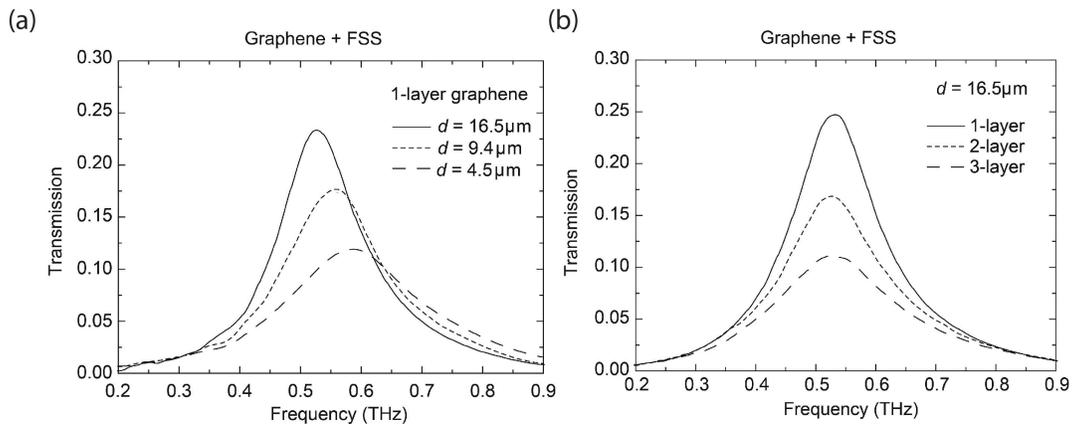
**Fig. 5** The structure of electro-absorption THz modulator which consists of a graphene on SiO<sub>2</sub> covered p-type Si substrate. The THz beam is normal incidence to the structure. (a) Measured DC conductivity (blue circles) and detector response (green squares) at 600 GHz as a function of gate voltages. The insets respectively show the band diagrams of graphene-SiO<sub>2</sub>-Si structure when the gate voltage is 0 V and 50 V. (b) Measured transmission intensity after removing the substrate and free carrier absorption in lightly doped Si substrate under two gate voltages. All figures are reproduced from Ref. 25.



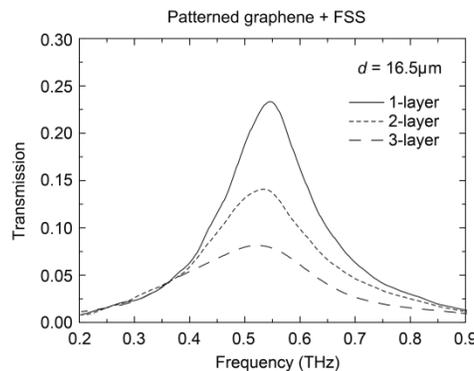
**Fig. 6** Schematic of the device structure with (a) un-patterned and (b) patterned graphene layers.

The promising performance of this prototype graphene modulator opened up a way for future THz devices. However, limited by the conductivity swing of typical quality of the state-of-the-art large-area graphene, such designs still cannot ensure practical applications. Following this demand, we have proposed and experimentally demonstrated that by taking advantage of the

enhanced field in the near field of metallic frequency selective surface (FSS), exceptional MD can potentially be achieved in graphene-based THz modulators [36]. It is found that, the distance between graphene layers and FSS can modify the strength of graphene-THz photon interaction, thus, by placing graphene layers at an optimal distance away from FSS, an improved electro-absorption modulation for THz waves can be obtained. More importantly, due to the highly spatially localized electromagnetic field in the near field of the FSS, we show that the modulator MD and IL can be maintained when the graphene is patterned into the complementary structure of the FSS. As a result, the substantial reduction of graphene area can enable high operation speed of THz modulators. Here by stacking and patterning 1-3 layers of graphene, we are able to tune the graphene conductivity from 0.8 mS to 2.4 mS, corresponding to a 65% intensity modulation. The thin-film flexible samples are fabricated on a polyimide (PI) substrate as schematically shown in Fig. 6a and b, consisting of graphene separated from the FSS by a polyimide spacer with a variable thickness.



**Fig. 7** (a) THz intensity transmission through the structure described in Fig. 6a with spacer thickness of 16.5  $\mu\text{m}$ , 9.4  $\mu\text{m}$ , 4.5  $\mu\text{m}$ . (b) THz intensity transmission through the structure described in Fig. 6a with 1-, 2-, and 3- layer of graphene respectively.



**Fig. 8** THz intensity transmission through the structure described in Fig. 6(b) with 1-, 2-, and 3- layer of patterned graphene respectively.

To investigate the effects of distance  $d$  between graphene and metallic FSS, we measured the power transmittance of the sample with 1-layer graphene but various spacer thickness  $d = 16.5 \mu\text{m}$ ,  $9.4 \mu\text{m}$ ,  $4.5 \mu\text{m}$ . It could be seen that for graphene layer with similar conductivity (all of them is around 0.8 mS), THz transmission at resonant frequency gradually decreases when graphene is placed closer to FSS due to the stronger near-field effects [36]. As graphene gets

closer to FSS, the direction of poynting vector below FSS tends to be more in-plane to the graphene layers, which corresponds to stronger interaction between graphene and THz waves, resulting in lowered THz transmission through the sample. Besides, the resonant frequency shifts due to the change of effective capacitance with varied sample thickness. The measured THz transmission through fabricated structure with 1-3 graphene layers as absorption medium but same spacer thickness  $d = 16.5 \mu\text{m}$  is shown in Fig. 7. Note that the extracted total conductivity of 1-, 2- and 3-layer graphene layers is respectively 0.7 mS, 1.3 mS, and 2.0 mS, approximately equal to the sum of the conductivities of the individual graphene layers [37]. As conductivity increases, THz transmission drops. Simulations processed in HFSS match well with measured transmission values, demonstrating the potential of THz intensity tuning in proposed structures [36].

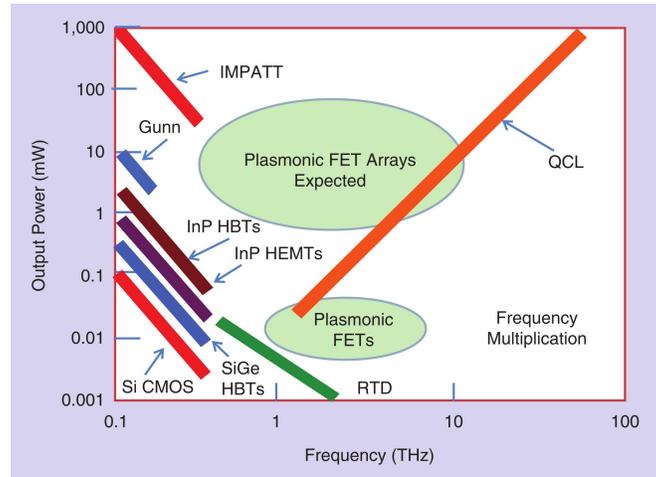
More importantly, we found that, transmission of THz waves through the entire structure maintains after patterning graphene layers into complementary structure of the FSS. We proceeded to fabricating sample structure as shown in Fig. 6b with 1-3 layers of graphene transferred and patterned into the shape of cross slot. The THz transmission is then measured in THz TDS and shown in Fig. 8. Interestingly, we notice that the power transmitted through the structures covered by patterned graphene is similar to that of samples with un-patterned graphene layers. These observations are also confirmed by HFSS simulations using the conductivity values extracted from Drude mode fitting, where the sum of graphene conductivities for 1-, 2- and 3-layers can be determined to be about 0.8 mS, 1.6 mS, and 2.4 mS. Considering the fact that almost all the THz electromagnetic waves at resonant frequency have to travel through the opening area in the FSS, the waves are highly spatially confined inside the shape of cross slots. Therefore, the graphene area complimentary to FSS is primarily responsible for wave intensity absorption, which is the reason why patterned graphene based structure layers can show similar transmissions as un-patterned ones. It is known that, one of fundamental issues limiting the operation speed of graphene-based THz modulators is the large resistance and capacitance induced active area of graphene films [25]. Our finding here is remarkably advantageous for future THz modulators by reducing the un-patterned graphene area to patterned structures but still maintaining the similar modulation strength.

### 3. Plasma-Waves in 2D Electron systems

Two-dimensional (2D) electron systems formed in the channel of sub-micrometer transistors enable the propagation of electron-density oscillations for frequencies laying in the THz region of the spectrum. These so-called plasma waves are generated when individual electrons in the channel are not able to follow high frequency oscillations and lag behind. The delay exhibited by the electrons presents an inductive behavior, which in turn couples with the gate-channel capacitor to give rise to a resonator of electron-density waves. The dynamics of these waves and their non-linear effects can be exploited to realize detectors, mixers and multipliers for frequencies inside the THz band [38]. In particular, resonant THz detectors have been demonstrated up to 3.1 THz for a 50-nm-InGaAs-channel-based high electron mobility transistor (HEMT) [39]. More recently, an asymmetric dual grating gate (A-DGG) was introduced by Watanabe et al. which harness the non-linear effects of 2D plasma waves and enhances detector responsivity with respect to the symmetric dual grating gate (S-DGG) layout [40]. This approach was employed to demonstrate highly sensitive THz detectors with responsivities up to 6.4kV/W at 1.5THz [41] and 22.7kV/W at 200GHz [42], operating in the non-resonant regime. The successful development of THz detectors makes plasma-wave electronics a good candidate for leveraging the THz band of the spectrum and this approach can be used for the fabrication of active THz devices with amplification and signal generation capabilities.

The predicted trends in performance for different device concepts in the THz band, including plasmonic field effect transistors (FETs), are displayed in Fig. 9 in terms of output power and

frequencies of operation [43]. Devices based on inter-sub-band transitions such as quantum cascade lasers (QCL) present also a promising trend towards the generation of THz signals. In this sense, III-N based quantum cascade structures are considered as good candidates for the fabrication of compact solid-state sources of THz radiation in contrast to the traditional III-V materials, which are incapable of emitting radiation around their LO-phonon energies ( $\sim 34$  meV  $\sim 8.2$  THz for InGaAs) [44].

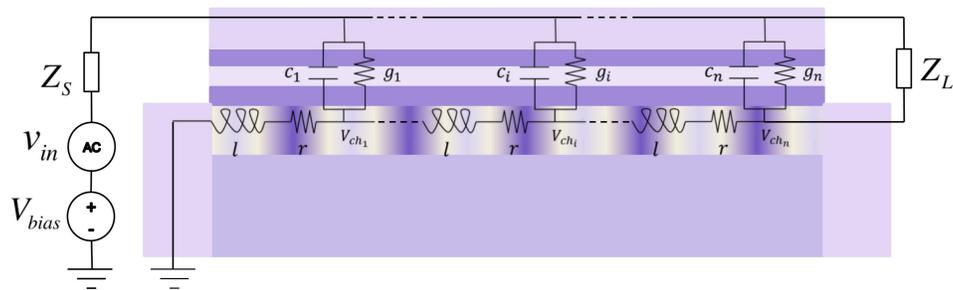


**Fig. 9** Predicted trends in performance for different device concepts, including plasmonic field effect transistors (FETs) and quantum cascade lasers (QCLs). Plasmonic FET arrays can be also considered as an approach to increase the output power of THz signals [43].

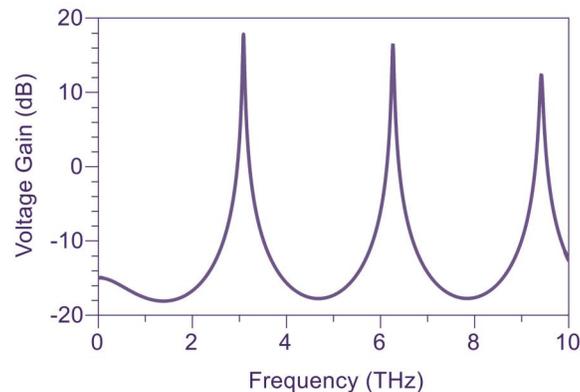
A second approach to enhance non-resonant THz detection was proposed by studying the effect of gate leakage in the plasma oscillations inside the channel [45]. The gate current leakage limits the amplitude of the electron-density oscillations thus degrading the responsivity of the device. The opposite effect can be achieved if the differential conductance between the gate and the channel is negative. This negative differential conductance (NDC) can be engineered if a tunneling double barrier structure is epitaxially grown on top of the channel.

In addition to enhancing the responsivity of a plasma-wave detector, the NDC also acts as a gain medium, which can not only prevent the density oscillations from damping but also amplify its swing [46]. The dynamics of a gated 2D electron gas (2DEG) formed in the channel of a plasma-wave HEMT can be modeled by a distributed transmission line scheme [47]. This scheme is also used to model the frequency response of the resonant tunneling diode gated plasma wave HEMT (RTD-gated-plasma wave HEMT). Figure 10 shows the distributed circuit model for an RTD-gated plasma wave HEMT including the 2DEG kinetic inductance  $l$ , the 2DEG resistance  $r$ , the resonant tunneling capacitance  $c_i$ , and the NDC  $g_i$ . It should be noted that the distributed scheme also takes into account the variation of the voltage in the channel  $V_{ch}$  and every single of the “lumped” element is a function of the non-uniform bias along the channel as well as the non-uniform 2DEG from the source to the drain, namely plasma wave.

The design of a THz RTD-gated plasma wave HEMT, using the InGaAs-material system as an example has shown that power amplification larger  $\sim 10$  dB is possible at  $\sim 3$  THz for a 190 nm-channel [48]. The voltage gain vs. frequency is displayed in Fig. 11; amplification and higher harmonic generation of THz signals evidence the gain provided the RTD gate and the non-linear nature of plasma-waves respectively.



**Fig. 10** Distributed high frequency transmission line model for a resonant tunneling diode gated plasma wave high electron mobility transistor (RTD-gated plasma wave HEMT). The tunneling double barrier provides the negative differential conductance (NDC), which in turn allows for the amplification of the plasma-waves in the channel.



**Fig. 11** Voltage gain vs. frequency for an InGaAs-based RTD-gated plasma wave HEMT [48]. Amplification and higher harmonic generation of THz signals evidence the gain provided the RTD gate and non-linear behavior of the 2D electron-density oscillations.

Wide band-gap materials such as GaN are also attractive for power amplification of THz signals. In this sense, recent investigations have successfully measured the kinetic inductance of the 2DEG at frequencies in the G-band (140-220 GHz) [49]. A good agreement was found between the measured and the kinetic inductance predicted by the distributed transmission line model; showing conclusively that plasma-oscillations were excited in the channel. These results show that the realization of plasma wave devices with the advantage of high power and high frequency capabilities are feasible.

The emerging plasma wave electronic devices exhibit promising trends towards the creation of THz sources and amplifiers. High power scalability can be provided by wide band-gap materials or by using arrays of plasmonic devices as can be seen in Fig.9. Finally, electronics based on electron-density oscillation also have the advantage of tunable operation and high-speed modulation of THz waves which can be employed in a variety of applications [50].

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