Semiconductor parameter extraction via current-voltage characterization and Bayesian inference methods

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Abstract — Defects in semiconductors, although atomistic in scale and often scarce in concentration, frequently represent the performance-limiting factor in optoelectronic devices such as solar cells. However, due to this scale and scarcity, direct experimental characterization of defects is technically challenging, time-consuming, and expensive. Even so, the fact that defects can limit device performance suggests that device-level characterization should be able to lend insight into their properties. In this work, we use Bayesian inference to demonstrate a way to relate experimental device measurements with defect properties (as well as other materials properties affected by the presence of defects, such as minority-carrier lifetime). We apply this method to solve the “inverse problem” to a forward device model – namely, determining which input parameters to the model produce the measured electrical output. This approach has distinct advantages over direct characterization. First, a single set of measurements can be used to determine many parameters (the number of which, in principle, is limited only by the computing resources available), saving time and cost of facilities and equipment. Second, since measurements are performed on materials and interfaces in their relevant device geometries (vs. separately prepared samples), the determined parameters are guaranteed to be physically relevant. We demonstrate application of this method to both tin monosulfide and silicon solar cells and discuss potential for future application in a broader array of systems.

Index Terms — Bayes methods, charge carrier lifetime, charge carrier mobility, parameter estimation, photovoltaic cells, silicon.

I. DEFECT PARAMETERS IN SEMICONDUCTORS

Defects in semiconductor devices frequently play a defining role in determining optoelectronic material and device properties, often even at trace concentrations (i.e., parts per billion or below). This is especially true for devices in which minority carriers determine operating mechanisms, such as photovoltaic solar cells and light-emitting diodes. Thus, in such devices, defect engineering remains an effort critical to ensuring high performance. Unfortunately, this effort is hampered by the fact that basic defect parameters are often unknown and difficult to measure, typically requiring specialized techniques (such as deep-level transient spectroscopy) and device architectures.

For minority-carrier devices in which Shockley-Read-Hall (SRH) recombination (also called defect-assisted recombination) dominates, the defect parameters of interest are defect density (N), energy level (E), and capture cross-sections for electrons and holes (σe, σh) [1,2]. Through these parameters, the effects of both injection level and temperature can greatly alter the strength of recombination, resulting in different regimes of behavior. Figure 1 illustrates a simple example of these regimes in a “generic” hypothetical p-type semiconductor (see caption for details). The effect of “shallow” vs. “deep” traps has opposite effects on SRH lifetime (τSRH) with respect to injection level — i.e., a significant decrease vs. slight increase (Figure 1, solid lines). Similarly, at lower temperatures τSRH decreases for a shallow defect whereas it increases for a deep defect (Figure 1, dotted lines). These behaviors are the basis for temperature-dependent and injection-dependent lifetime spectroscopy, which as documented by Rein et al. [3] can in theory be used to identify defects based on these divergent behaviors. In practice, however, the numerous possible combinations of N, E, σe, and σh can vastly complicate the process of finding confident fits to these parameters.

In this work, we aim to extract basic defect parameters in photovoltaic semiconductors by feeding experimental solar cell measurements (i.e., temperature- and illumination-dependent...
current–voltage data, or JVTi) into a numerical solar cell model developed in PC1D and applying a Bayesian inference algorithm. We first demonstrate the Bayesian inference approach by calculating probability distributions of materials and device parameters in SnS solar cells [4], some of which had not been previously measurable. We then outline our approach to applying this method to extract $E_a$, $a$, and $\alpha$ for interstitial iron (Fe) in silicon solar cells. These results serve as validation for using this new method of defect characterization on newer, less understood semiconductor materials for which defect parameters are likely less well known.

II. BAYESIAN INFERENCE ALGORITHM

Bayes’ Theorem is a statement about the relationship between conditional probabilities. With $H$ as a hypothesis and $E$ the evidence:

$$P(H|E) = \frac{P(H)P(E|H)}{P(E)}$$  (1)

$P(H)$ is referred to as the prior distribution, representing our initial beliefs about how a system will behave. Bayes’ theorem gives us a prescription for how to update this prior when presented with some evidence $E$ (for example, the outcome of an experimental measurement) to create the posterior distribution $P(H|E)$. In particular, we use the likelihood $P(E|H)$, or the probability that we would observe the evidence if our hypothesis is true. We can perform this procedure iteratively to further update our posterior in the face of further measurements.

The power of this approach comes from the ability to fit many parameters, for which the parameter space and shape of the underlying probability distribution may be complicated. In such a case, a fitting approach such as a least-squares regression may fall into a “local minimum” and miss the true values of the materials properties to be measured. The Bayes approach instead produces a probability distribution over the entire parameter space, which yields not only the most likely values of parameters, but also insight into how parameters may depend upon one another.

As a first proof of concept, we applied this approach to tin monosulfide (SnS) solar cells [5]. SnS is a relatively new candidate photovoltaic material, but one that our group had extensively characterized in the past, making it a fruitful platform to verify the Bayesian method. Using a collection of current–voltage curves taken at three different temperatures and two illumination levels, we generated a probability distribution over four “unknown” input parameters to a SCAPS-1D [6] model of the devices: minority carrier (electron) mobility $\mu$ and lifetime $\tau$ in the SnS absorber layer, and the conduction band offset $\Delta E_c$ and surface recombination velocity $S_{int}$ at the interface between the absorber and the Zn(O,S) buffer layer. A schematic of the device is shown in Figure 2. The results of this analysis are shown in Figure 3. The conduction band offset was fit to be $-0.21 \pm 0.03$ eV, consistent with the previous measurement of $-0.38 \pm 0.2$ eV [7] and fit with a higher precision than direct measurement allows.

While the lifetime and mobility did not individually converge in this analysis, the two-variable marginalization shows a line of higher probability corresponding to a constant product $JUT$, indicating that the diffusion length is well-constrained by the measurement. Surface recombination velocity $S_{int}$ had never previously been measured for this interface, and was fit to between 1,000–1,800 cm/s. $S_{int}$ is an example of a property that is extremely difficult to measure but can be limiting to device performance, thus emphasizing the value of this Bayesian fitting technique in this scenario.

The inset in Figure 3 shows the Shannon entropy ($\Sigma P \log P$) of each parameter individually as well as the overall

![Fig. 2. Schematic (not to scale) of the SnS device that was characterized.](image)

![Fig. 3. Results of SnS device Bayesian analysis. On the diagonal are single-variable distributions over each of the four parameters, and below the diagonal the corresponding two-variable marginalizations. Inset shows normalized Shannon entropy as a function of number of observations fed into the inference routine.](image)
distribution, normalized to start at unity for the uniform
distribution in each case. This is a further indication that the fit
is converging as more data is fed into the Bayesian inference
algorithm.

IV. JVTi Measurements on Iron-Contaminated Silicon
Solar Cells

Defect parameters such as energy level and capture cross-
section are also, like $\Delta n_i$, physical parameters that are extremely
difficult to probe directly. To further validate our methods, we
choose to apply our framework to silicon solar cells
contaminated with known levels of iron, an impurity whose
defect parameters in silicon have been thoroughly characterized
[8]. We utilize samples from a previous work by Vahanissi et al. [9]
where the interstitial iron concentrations (after cell
processing) have been measured at $N_i = 2 \times 10^{12}$ cm$^{-3}$. This
constrains an additional parameter, improving the quality of our
fits to $E_t$, $\alpha_i$, and $\sigma_i$.

JVTi measurements were performed on an intentionally
contaminated sample (initial [Fe] = $2 \times 10^{14}$ cm$^{-3}$) and an
uncontaminated reference—the “60A” samples from Ref. [9].

Semi-automated current–voltage measurements were
performed using a Keithley 2400 sourcemeter connected to
LabView. Temperature was varied from 300 to 175 K (in
increments of 25 K) using an ARS cryostat (DE-204SI), liquid
helium compressor (ARS-4HW), and polyimide heater (Minco
HAP6943) under vacuum controlled by a LakeShore 331
temperature controller. Eight illumination levels were
measured—at 1.01, 0.92, 0.69, 0.31, 0.093, 0.048, 0.0093, and
0.0045 Suns—using a Newport Oriel LCS-100 Solar Simulator
and neutral density filters.

As a preliminary analysis, we used the Bayesian inference
routine to fit a simple ideal diode model:

$$J(V, T, i) = J_0(T, i) \left( e^{\frac{qV}{nkT}} - 1 \right) + J_{sc}$$

(2)

where $J_0$ is given by[10]:

$$J_0(T, i) = \frac{q n_i^2(T)}{N_A} \sqrt{\frac{D_n}{\tau_n(i)}}$$

(3)

With only two free parameters (ideality factor $n$ and electron
lifetime $\tau_n$) we were able to model the current–voltage curves
relatively accurately and estimate fitted lifetimes corresponding
to the orders of magnitude expected, as shown in Figure 4.

To obtain estimates for specific defect parameters $E_t$, $\alpha_i$, and $\sigma_i$, we extend this analysis using a numerical model in
cmd-PC1D 6.2 [9,10], which incorporates full Shockley-Read-
Hall recombination analysis with built-in dependencies on
temperature and injection level. Results from these fits are
shown in Figure 5, and JV curves corresponding to the
highest-probability parameter values in Figure 6. $\tau_{\alpha_0}$ and $\tau_{\sigma_0}$
(along with $E_t$) were the direct inputs, but they can be easily
related to $\sigma_i$.
between the uncontaminated and contaminated values for $r$. The value in this range is slightly larger than the actual value of $r$. The upper $R^2$ value is between $10^{-5}$ - $10^{-7}$ s (100 ns - 10 µs), along with values for $E_i$ that peak at $-0.45$ eV and $+0.30$ eV compared to the intrinsic level $E_i$ (which is $0.56$ eV above the valence band $E_V$). When looking at the covariance of these two parameters (lower-left plot), it becomes clear that “constant recombination space” involves a tradeoff—higher values of $\tau_{ro}$ correlate with “deeper” traps ($E_i$ closer to zero). This behavior is expected from SRH recombination statistics. The high values of $\tau_{ro}$ are also expected for a $p$-type absorber—in other words, majority-carrier recombination parameters do not limit recombination. It is also instructive to note that the values for $\tau_{ro}$ here are slightly lower than those extracted from Bayesian analysis with the ideal-diode framework in Figure 4.

Bayesian inference results for the contaminated cell show uniformly lower values for $\tau_{ro}$, peaking below $10^{-8}$ s. Assuming a trap density $N_t = 2 \times 10^{12}$ cm$^{-3}$ as previously measured directly [9] along with a thermal velocity $v_{th,s} = 2.6 \times 10^5$ cm/s, a range of $\tau_{ro}$ between $10^{-9} - 10^{-7}$ s corresponds to a range of $\sigma_n$ between $2 \times 10^{-12} - 2 \times 10^{-13}$ cm$^2$. The upper value in this range is slightly larger than the actual value of $4 \times 10^{-14}$ cm$^2$ [6, 11] which might be explained by an underestimate of $N_t$ or the unaccounted-for presence of a different defect. Despite this slight discrepancy, it remains clear that the Bayesian inference clearly identified differences in values for $\tau_{ro}$ between the uncontaminated and contaminated samples.

Similarly, a value for $\tau_{ro}$ of $2 \times 10^{-3}$ s, using the same value for $N_t$ and a thermal velocity $v_{th,s} = 1.7 \times 10^5$ cm/s, corresponds to a value of $\sigma_n = 1.5 \times 10^{-17}$ cm$^2$, which falls well within the range of values reported in literature [8].

For $E_i$, the values are less well converged without further subdivision within the Bayesian inference algorithm, which is planned as a continuation of this work. Still, they are relatively well centered around the actual value of $E_i = -0.185$ eV (or $E_V + 0.375$ eV) [6,12].

Overall, comparing the results between the uncontaminated and contaminated cells, this Bayesian inference framework clearly can distinguish high and low lifetimes, and helps show how defect parameters covary. Estimated values for $E_i$, $\sigma_n$, and $\sigma_p$ all fall close to or within ranges documented in literature, which demonstrates general promise for applying Bayesian inference approaches to extract defect parameters in solar cells. We are optimistic that with further refinement to the models (e.g. including temperature dependence of capture cross-sections as described in [8]) and updates to the computational tools (e.g. to allow more free parameters), we can improve the accuracy and precision of these fits and make the approach more suitable for application in less thoroughly characterized systems.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Bayesian inference as a technique to invert numerical device models is a powerful approach enabling extraction of values for multiple arbitrary physical parameters from a set of simple, automatable, electrical measurements. This approach is preferable in many cases to directly measuring these parameters. It is significantly faster, requiring approximately a day each of measurement and compute time, assuming a modest (~60-core) high-performance cluster. It is also less expensive due to fewer equipment requirements. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, it can offer more physically relevant measurements of the parameters than conventional “direct” measurement techniques. For example, Hall mobility measurements probe lateral majority-carrier mobility, while through-film minority carrier mobility is the relevant limiting factor in PV devices. Especially in new materials being explored for PV, many of which exhibit anisotropic charge transport properties, this difference can be critical. The Bayesian approach, by using actual device data, by definition gives the device-relevant version of all such parameters. In our latest study of iron-contaminated silicon devices, we demonstrate that the approach can also be fruitful in measuring defect parameters, which we hope to apply to novel PV materials to accelerate identification of performance-limiting properties.

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