Design and Operation of Microelectrochemical Gates and Integrated Circuits

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Abstract: Here we report a simple design philosophy, based on the principles of bipolar electrochemistry, for the operation of microelectrochemical integrated circuits. The inputs for these systems are simple voltage sources, but because they do not require much power they could be activated by chemical or biological reactions. Device output is an optical signal arising from electrogenerated chemiluminescence. Individual microelectrochemical logic gates are described first, and then multiple logic circuits are integrated into a single microfluidic channel to yield an integrated circuit that can perform parallel logic functions. AND, OR, NOR, and NAND gates are described. Eventually, systems such as those described here could provide on-chip data processing functions for lab-on-a-chip devices.

Introduction

Here we report a simple approach for fabricating microelectrochemical integrated circuits (MICs), which are based on the principles of bipolar electrochemistry.1 Individual microelectrochemical gates are able to perform basic logic functions, such as AND, OR, and NAND, but these gates can also be linked within a single microfluidic channel to perform parallel logic functions. The output state of these MICs is reported using electrogenerated chemiluminescence (ECL),1,2 which generates an optical signal that can be easily detected using a CCD or even with the naked eye. Importantly, individual MICs are powered without wires and using just a single pair of driving electrodes that operate an arbitrarily large number of gates. The significance of MICs is that their logic operations depend on the state of faradaic electrochemical reactions present within microchannels, and therefore they provide a bridge between electronics and electrochemistry.

The challenge of signal processing and computation in microfluidic devices has become an active area of research as interest in microfluidics continues to expand. Rather than compete directly with the success of solid-state electronic processors, information processing in chemical or microfluidic systems3,4 attempts to repurpose the concepts underlying solid-state processors and adapt them to chemical-based analysis.5 By combining the advantages of computing systems with microfluidics, the functionality of small, high-density chemical devices may become more efficient and intelligent.6,7

Several examples of microfluidic-based logic gate designs have been reported. For example, Prakash and Gershenfeld used bubbles in multichannel microfluidic designs to demonstrate AND, OR, and NOT logic functions, a flip-flop device, a counter, an oscillator, and a modulator.8 Here, the bubbles were “bit” information carriers, and bubble-to-bubble hydrodynamic interactions were used to control flow resistance in specific microchannels. Therefore, when the bubbles were injected as input signals, the paths of the bubbles through these devices were determined as a result of the changing flow resistances. The paths are the output of the logic operations, and the presence of the bubbles monitored at specific positions presented digital output signals.

Park and co-workers have also reported AND, XOR, and INH (inhibiting) logic gates that are based on chemical changes initiated by controlled mixing of reactants.9 Their device consisted of two layers: the top layer contained a microfluidic mixer that accepted incoming chemical signals (for example, different pHs or metal ion concentrations), and the bottom layer contained valves that controlled the flow of the incoming fluids of the top layer. The logic functions were carried out by the fluidic plumbing of the bottom layer, and the output state was determined by the state of the mixed solutions in the top layer.

We previously reported electrochemical microfluidic logic gates, including OR and NAND gates, that used electroactive

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Microelectrochemical Gates and Integrated Circuits

Incorporating Cr adhesion layers. We have described the procedure for fabricating such devices previously, but it is briefly summarized here. The PDMS channels were prepared from Sylgard 184 (Dow Corning, Midland, MI) by soft lithography. The dimensions of the channel were 12.0 mm long, 1.0 mm wide, and 28 µm high. A 1.0 mm-diameter hole punch was used to form the reservoirs at the ends of the microchannel.

The logic gate electrodes were fabricated as 50 µm-wide microbands using appropriate mask designs on Au-coated glass slides (5 nm Cr adhesion layer and 100 nm Au layer. EMF Corp., Ithaca, NY). A layer of positive photore sist (~10 µm thick, AZ P4620) was spin-coated onto the glass slide and then exposed to UV light through a positive photomask containing the electrode design. These microstructures were then transferred to the Au slides after developing the photore sist (AZ 421 K. AZ Electronic Materials, Somerville, NJ) for 2 min and etching the Au and Cr layers. The Au layer was removed by immersion into an aqueous solution containing 5% I2 and 10% KI (w/v) for 2 min, and the Cr adhesion layer was etched using an aqueous solution containing 9% (NH4)2Ce(NO3)6 (w/v) and 6% HClO4 (v/v) for 30 s. Finally, the remaining photore sist was removed with acetone, and the slides were cleaned in piranha solution prior to assembly of the microfluidic device. (Warning: piranha solution is a strong oxidant, consisting of 30% H2O2 and 70% H2SO4 (v/v), that reacts violently with organic materials. It should be handled with extreme care, and all work should be performed under a fume hood and with protective gear.) The microfabricated slides and PDMS microchannels were created with an air plasma for 15 s, and then they were pressed together with the BPEs situated at the center of the channel.

Logic Gate Operation. The inputs to the logic gates are independent and ungrounded voltages (InA and InB) applied to two pairs of microband electrodes using a dual-output power supply (E3620A, Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA). The device output is an ECL signal at the reporting BPE. The electric field inside the microfluidic channel, which is responsible for activating the reporting BPE, is generated by applying 26.0 V across the channel using a power supply (Lambda LLS-9120, TDK-Lambda Americas Inc., San Diego, CA).

ECL output signals were detected by an optical microscope (Nikon AZ100, Nikon Co., Tokyo, Japan) equipped with a mercury lamp (Nikon) and a CCD camera (Cascade, Photometrics Ltd., Tucson, AZ). The ECL intensity profiles were obtained using V+ Precision Digital Imaging software (Digital Optics, Auckland, New Zealand). For consistency, the ECL reporting electrode is situated on the right side of each device.

Results and Discussion

Controlling the Response of BPEs by Applying Input Voltages. When a potential (\(E_{app}\)) is applied across a microchannel that has been filled with an electrolyte solution (Scheme 1a), a uniform electric field (\(V_0\)) results in a linear potential gradient through the channel. Therefore, the potential difference (\(\Delta E_{e-field}\)) between any two points, separated by distance \(d\), along the channel is described by eq 1.

\[
\Delta E_{e-field} = V_0 d
\]

When microbands separated by distance \(d\) are externally connected by a jumper wire, they form a split BPE, wherein each microband acts as either a cathodic or anodic pole (Scheme 1a).19,21,22 The interfacial potential difference between the BPE and the solution is the sum of the anodic and cathodic interfacial

Experimental Section

Chemicals. The following chemicals were used as received unless otherwise noted in the text: Ru(bpy)32+/3, tri-n-propylamine (TPA) from Sigma-Aldrich (Milwaukee, WI). All solutions contained 2.0 mM Ru(bpy)32+/3, 25.0 mM TPA, and 0.10 M phosphate buffer (pH 6.9). Milli-Q water (Milli-Q reagent water system, Millipore, Bedford, MA) was used to prepare all aqueous solutions.

Device Fabrication. The microchannels were prepared from poly(dimethylsiloxane) (PDMS) monoliths, and the BPEs were microfabricated Au wires supported on glass substrates and

overpotentials ($\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = \eta_a - \eta_c$) and in this case is equal to $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$ (Scheme 1b). Under these circumstances, we say that the BPE is in a passive mode, because $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is determined exclusively by the externally applied, uniform electric field, $V_{\text{in}}$. However, when an auxiliary input voltage ($\Delta E_{\text{in}}$) is applied between the microbands comprising the split BPE using an ungrounded power supply, $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}} = \eta_a - \eta_c + \Delta E_{\text{in}}$ (Scheme 1c and 1d). Thus, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ can be described by eq 2.

$$\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = \eta_a - \eta_c = \Delta E_{\text{e-field}} - \Delta E_{\text{in}}$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

In this case, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ will no longer equal $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$. For example, when the polarity of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ is positive, which matches the polarity of the applied voltage (Scheme 1c), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} < \Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$. In contrast, when the polarity of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ is negative, which opposes the polarity of the applied voltage (Scheme 1d), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} > \Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$.

In the situation described by eq 2, the BPE enters an active mode, where a voltage applied directly to the BPE microbands plays a role in determining $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$. Because $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is the driving force for electrochemical reactions at the BPE, manipulation of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ provides a means for controlling the rate of electrochemical reactions at the two poles of the BPE. Because $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ is applied locally, many pairs of microband electrodes can be controlled independently of one another for a constant value of $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$. Importantly, the voltage source that applies $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ need not be a power supply or battery, which are used for this purpose in the present study, but rather could be any electrochemical reaction that provides a suitable voltage.

Using Electrogenerated Chemiluminescence (ECL) as the Device Output. In this study, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is controlled by electrochemical logic gates, and the digital output is then reported by an optical ON/OFF signal rather than by an electrical signal. When $\sim 2.10 \text{ V} > \Delta E_{\text{elec}} > \sim 1.60 \text{ V}$, $\text{O}_2$ will be reduced at the cathode$^{13}$ of the BPE and Ru(bpy)$_3^{2+}$ and TPrA will be oxidized at the anode, thus generating an ECL signal at the anodic pole.$^{19}$ The upper voltage limit is set by the onset of ECL quenching (see Supporting Information). The presence of ECL represents a digital “true”, “high”, or “1” output, while no ECL emission indicates a digital “false”, “low”, or “0” output. We will call the lower voltage threshold for ECL emission $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, and therefore when $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} > \Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$ (1.60 V), an ECL signal will be detected at the anodic pole of the BPE.

Determination of Input Parameters. The electric field ($V_{\text{in}}$) in the microfluidic channel is generated by a pair of driving electrodes placed in reservoirs at either end of the channel, and these electrodes supply a driving voltage ($E_{\text{tot}}$), as Scheme 1 illustrates. Therefore, $V_{\text{in}} = E_{\text{tot}}/l_{\text{channel}}$, where $l_{\text{channel}}$ is the length of the microfluidic channel. However, the actual value of $V_{\text{in}}$ is always somewhat smaller than this equation predicts, because some of $E_{\text{tot}}$ is lost at the driving electrode/solution interface.$^{19}$ For sensor applications,$^{13}$ we normally ignore this loss but it is not negligible in the logic gate calculations. Accordingly, accurate values of $V_{\text{in}}$ were measured by determining $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$ between two microband electrodes having a spacing of $d = 1.00 \text{ mm}$, while $E_{\text{tot}}$ was varied between 20.0 and 30.0 V. The results of this experiment are plotted in Fig. 1. Using the values from this experimentally determined curve and eq 1 to substitute $V_{\text{in}}$ for $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$, we can write $V_{\text{in}}$ (V/mm) as a linear function of $E_{\text{tot}}$ (eq 3).

$$V_{\text{in}} = 0.076 \times E_{\text{tot}} - 0.089$$  \hspace{1cm} (3)

Using eqs 1–3, the value of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ required to turn a logic gate on or off can be reliably estimated. For example, the NOT gate shown in Scheme 2, with $d = 1.00 \text{ mm}$ and $E_{\text{tot}} = 26.0 \text{ V}$, has an estimated $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = 1.89 \text{ V}$ (eq 3) when $\Delta E_{\text{in}} = 0 \text{ V}$; that is, when the input is “0”. This value of 1.89 V is larger than the threshold potential for ECL ($\Delta E_{\text{ECL}} = 1.60 \text{ V}$), so ECL will be present and the NOT gate has a value of “1”. To prevent ECL emission, so that the device output is “0”, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ must be $< \Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$. This requires a voltage input (“1”) across the BPE such that $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ is large enough to force $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} < 1.60 \text{ V}$, as shown in Scheme 1c and eq 2. In other words, the input must satisfy: $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}} - \Delta E_{\text{in}} = \Delta E_{\text{elec}} < \Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$. For this example we find...
that $\Delta E_{\text{in}} > \Delta E_{\text{e-field}} - \Delta E_{\text{ECL}} = 1.89 - 1.60 = 0.29$ V. The value 0.29 V, then, is the minimum value of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ that can act as the logic input “1” and prevent ECL emission. To summarize: an input of “1” will prevent ECL at the BPE, giving an output of “0”, while an input of “0” will not disrupt the ECL signal, yielding an output of “1”. This behavior is consistent with the truth table of a NOT gate.5 Note that the value of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ required to change the output state of the logic gate depends strongly on $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$, which is a function of $d$, $\ell_{\text{channel}}$, and $E_{\text{tot}}$.

AND, OR, NAND, and NOR Logic Gates. Each of these four logic gates receives two input signals and sends one output signal, and here we demonstrate how a simple set of three microband electrodes can be designed to perform any of these logic functions.

An AND gate is constructed from three microbands spanning the width of the microchannel and spaced by 300 $\mu$m ($d = 600 \mu$m, Figure 2a). Two input terminals, InA and InB, are connected between the microbands in series to create a split BPE that can receive external voltage inputs. The input voltages used to control this device were supplied by a dual-output power supply with values for $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ of 0 V for an input of “0” and $-0.30$ V for an input of “1”. Note that these input voltages were applied with a polarity opposite that of the applied electric field, $E_{\text{tot}} = 26.0$ V (Scheme 1d). The term for $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ in eq 2 can now be expanded to accommodate two inputs (eq 4).

$$\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = \Delta E_{\text{e-field}} - \Delta E_{\text{in,InA}} - \Delta E_{\text{in,InB}}$$ (4)

Here, $\Delta E_{\text{in,InA}}$ and $\Delta E_{\text{in,InB}}$ are the components of $\Delta E_{\text{in}}$ from InA and InB, respectively. When InA = InB = 0 V, the measured voltage ($\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$) between the two outer microband electrodes (Figure 2a) is 1.10 V (compare to the value calculated from eq 3, which is 1.13 V). Thus, an initial input of “0” to both InA and InB (0,0) results in $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = 1.10$ V, according to eq 4. This value for $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is less than the required voltage for ECL emission ($\Delta E_{\text{ECL}} = 1.60$ V); therefore, the ECL output will be “0”. However, when input (1,1) is applied, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ will increase to 1.70 V (eq 4), and this value is now higher than $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$ so that ECL is observed and the device output is “1”. When either input (1,0) or (0,1) is applied, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ will equal 1.40 V, which is still less than $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$. Therefore, no ECL will be visible and the output will remain “0”. The ECL intensities from a functional microelectrochemical AND gate are shown in Figure 2b, along with the AND truth table.

The OR logic gate was designed around parallel, rather than serial, connections between inputs InA and InB, where the anodic microband is the ECL emitter (Figure 3). Due to these parallel connections, $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is affected equally by either input, as expressed in eqs 5 and 6.

$$\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}} = \Delta E_{\text{e-field}} - \Delta E_{\text{in,InA}}$$ (5)
$$\Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}} = \Delta E_{\text{e-field}} - \Delta E_{\text{in,InB}}$$ (6)

Here, $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}}$ and $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}}$ are the voltages between each of the two shorter electrodes and the long electrode in Figure 3. For this system, $d = 200 \mu$m, $E_{\text{tot}} = 26.0$ V, and the measured $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$ is 0.47 V. When $\Delta E_{\text{in}} = 0$ V, the input is “0”, and when $\Delta E_{\text{in}} = -1.50$ V, the input is “1”. Again, the polarity of the voltage inputs run opposite to that of the electric field applied to the driving electrodes (Scheme 1d). According to eqs 5 and 6, an input of (0,0) results in $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}} = \Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}} = 0.47$ V. In this case both $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}}$ and $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}}$ are less than $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, so the ECL output will be “0”. For inputs of (1,0) and (0,1), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ increases to 1.97 V despite the fact that only a single input is set high. Because 1.97 V > $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, an ECL output of “1” results. For an input of (1,1), eq 5 shows that $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ will again equal 1.97 V and therefore gives rise to an ECL output of “1”. A more detailed explanation about the interplay between the two input signals for the AND and the OR gates, and their effect on the ECL emission, is provided in the Supporting Information.

NOR and NAND logic gates have the same basic designs as the just-described AND and OR gates, but the distances between the microbands are different and the polarity of the input signals are reversed so that they align with the electric field in the microchannel (Scheme 1c). For both the NOR and NAND systems: $d = 1.00 \text{ mm}$, $E_{\text{tot}} = 26.0$ V, and the measured $\Delta E_{\text{e-field}}$ is 1.89 V. The input voltages are $\Delta E_{\text{in}} = 0$ V for “0” and 0.50 V for “1”.

Figure 4a shows the NAND gate design. Because InA and InB are connected to the output terminal in parallel, eqs 5 and 6 apply to the NAND gate. For input (0,0), $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}} = \Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}} = 1.89$ V, which is > $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, so an ECL signal will be emitted from the anodic microband and the device output is “1”. For input (1,0), $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}} = 1.89 - 0.50 = 1.39$ and $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}} = 1.89 - 0 = 1.89$ V. Because the latter value is higher than $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, and because the reporting anodic pole is connected in
parallel, the ECL signal will persist despite the fact that $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}}$ is $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$. Consequently, an output of “1” is reported from an input of (1,0). The same reasoning applies for an input of (0,1), which also results in an output of “1”. For input (1,1), the values of $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InA}}$ and $\Delta E_{\text{elec,InB}}$ are both 1.39 V, which is $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$. The ECL signal is thus extinguished, yielding an output of “0”.

Figure 4b shows ECL micrographs of the output of a NAND gate operating under each of the four possible input configurations.

Figure 5a shows a NOR gate design, where the two input terminals are arranged in series, so that eq 4 applies. This system is similar to the AND gate design depicted in Figure 2, but the polarities of InA and InB are reversed. For input (0,0), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is calculated from eq 4 to be 1.89 V. This value is $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, and therefore ECL will be emitted to give an output of “1”. For an input of either (0,1) or (1,0), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ will equal 1.39 V, which is $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, so no ECL is generated and an output of “0” is reported. For input (1,1), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = 0.89$ V, and again no ECL is emitted. In summary, an output of “0” is reported for inputs of (0,1) and (1,1), which is in keeping with the logic of the NOR gate. Figure 5b shows experimental output data for application of the following sequential input combinations: (0,0) $\rightarrow$ (1,0) $\rightarrow$ (1,1) $\rightarrow$ (0,0) $\rightarrow$ (0,1). The outputs marked with an asterisk in frame c correspond to the results in frame g.

Figure 6a shows a NOR gate design, where two input terminals are arranged in series, so that eq 4 applies. This system is similar to the AND gate design depicted in Figure 2, but the polarities of InA and InB are reversed. For input (0,0), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ is calculated from eq 4 to be 1.89 V. This value is $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, and therefore ECL will be emitted to give an output of “1”. For an input of either (0,1) or (1,0), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}}$ will equal 1.39 V, which is $\Delta E_{\text{ECL}}$, so no ECL is generated and an output of “0” is reported. For input (1,1), $\Delta E_{\text{elec}} = 0.89$ V, and again no ECL is emitted. In summary, an output of “0” is reported for inputs of (0,1) and (1,1), which is in keeping with the logic of the NOR gate. Figure 5b shows experimental output data for application of the following sequential input combinations: (0,0) $\rightarrow$ (1,0) $\rightarrow$ (1,1) $\rightarrow$ (0,0) $\rightarrow$ (0,1).

Integration of Multiple Logic Gates within a Microfluidic Channel. One of the main advantages of using BPEs in a microfluidic channel is that the uniform electric field acts identically on multiple electrodes. That is, if an array of BPEs is present in a single microchannel, each electrode will act independently of the others without the need for additional power supplies. This property holds for split, as well as continuous, BPEs, and therefore it applies to the bipolar logic gate designs described here. Accordingly, an array of BPE logic gates can be easily fabricated and can operate in unison within a single microchannel. The efficacy of this idea is demonstrated in Figure 6a, where an array comprised of NOR, OR, and NAND gates operates simultaneously and independently within the same microchannel.

To demonstrate the function of this MIC, $\Delta E_{\text{in}} = 0$ V was used for an input of “0” and 1.5 V for an input of “1”. The
power sources for these inputs were conventional AA batteries, which have a fixed output of 1.5 V. When input (0,0) was applied to all the logic gates, only the NOR and NAND gates reported output “1” (Figure 6d). When either input (0,1) or (1,0) was applied, an output of “1” was only observed at the OR and NAND gates (Figure 6e). When the input (1,1) was applied, only the OR gate reported an output of “1” (Figure 6f). These experimental results are summarized in the truth table shown in Figure 6c, where each logic gate has performed the proper algorithm.

Finally, to demonstrate the simultaneous and independent function of each logic gate, we applied different input signals to each of the logic gates in the array: (0,0) to NOR, (0,1) to OR, and (1,1) to NAND. The resulting outputs were “1”, “1”, and “0” (Figure 6g). This result perfectly matches the expected outputs denoted by asterisks in the truth table. Therefore, the electrochemical logic operators in the MIC responded correctly, individually, and simultaneously to their inputs.

Summary and Conclusions

The logic gates described here take advantage of bipolar electrochemistry in that they are powered without wires via a single pair of driving electrodes. This means they can operate as discrete devices or in an array format with little added complexity and no additional power supplies. In this paper we also introduced the concept of “active” BPEs and used them to construct individual and integrated logic gates. Under active control, the total potential difference between a BPE and the solution is supplied by a constant electric field through the microchannel as well as by a small external voltage applied directly across the microbands comprising the BPE. The external voltage source used here was a power supply or battery, but it could just as easily have been an unamplified electrochemical signal originating from a sensor or biological source.

As alluded to above, the input voltages used to activate these devices are small, ∼1 V, while conventional electric control signals for TTL or CMOS range from 5 to 12 V. Indeed, the signal levels used in the logic designs described here are comparable to low-voltage-differential-signals (LVDS), which are being developed for low-current applications in the electronics field. In addition, MICs are optoelectronic devices in that they accept electrical inputs and provide optical outputs. This is convenient, because it means that the state of the devices can be read without the need for wires.

Finally, an important aspect of the findings described here is the following. While the fluidic components of lab-on-a-chip devices are highly miniaturized, the data processing aspects have been largely ignored. Clearly, there is a place for self-powered, “sample-in—answer-out” platforms, and the systems reported here are a first step in that direction. In the future, we anticipate full integration of data processing onto the chip, and that this will lead to interesting possibilities for smarter and more efficient chemical and biological sensors.

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Supporting Information Available: Additional information about ECL measurements as a function of applied potentials and about how the input signals affect the electrode potentials. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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