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## Valence band modification of Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> by Ni-doping: Creating a high figure of merit p-type TCO

Elisabetta Arca <sup>\*a‡</sup>, Aoife B. Kehoe <sup>b</sup>, Tim D. Veal <sup>c</sup>, Aleksey Shmeliov <sup>b</sup>, David O. Scanlon <sup>c,d</sup>, Clive Downing <sup>b</sup>, Dermot Daly <sup>b</sup>, Daragh Mullarkey <sup>a</sup>, Igor V. Shvets <sup>a</sup>, Valeria Nicolosi <sup>b</sup>, and Graeme W. Watson <sup>b</sup>

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p-type transparent conductors and semiconductors still suffer from remarkably low performance compared to their more widespread n-type counterparts, despite extensive investigation into their development. In this contribution, we present a comparative study on the defect chemistry of potential p-type transparent conducting oxides Mg-doped and Ni-doped Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. Conductivities as high as 28 S cm<sup>-1</sup> were achieved by Ni-doping. By benchmarking crystallography and spectroscopy characterization against density functional theory calculations, we show that the incorporation of Ni into Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> contributes to the composition of the valence band, making the formed holes more delocalized, while Mg states do not interact with the valence band in Mg-doped Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>. Furthermore, it is experimentally proven that Ni has a higher solubility in Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> than Mg, at least in the highly non-thermodynamic deposition conditions used for these experiments, which directly translates into a higher acceptor concentration. The combination of these two effects means that Ni is a more effective acceptor in Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> than Mg and explains the improved conductivity observed for the former.

### 1 Introduction

Transparent conducting oxides (TCOs) are a particular class of materials which combine both optical transparency and electrical conductivity<sup>1–4</sup>. This peculiarity arises from the stringent dual requirements of having the first allowed optical transition at energy values higher than 3.1 eV and having uncompensated shallow donor (or acceptor) states close to the bottom (top) of the conduction band minimum (valence band maximum)<sup>1–4</sup>. The transparency window in the visible range is normally realized by (i) having a material with a wide fundamental band gap, such as in the case of n-type BaSnO<sub>3</sub><sup>5</sup> or p-type CuAlO<sub>2</sub><sup>6</sup>, or (ii) having a smaller band gap associated with a forbidden optical transition and the first allowed optical transition higher than 3.1 eV, like in

the case of n-type In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub><sup>7</sup> or p-type SnO<sub>8</sub>. Dopability, either n- or p-type, is achieved via alignment of the band edges of the oxides with respect to the vacuum level and, at the same time, the ability to insert uncompensated defects<sup>9–11</sup>.

To date, p-type transparent conductors and semiconductors have displayed severely poorer properties than their n-type counterparts. So far the best reported p-type TCOs have conductivities in the range of 10<sup>2</sup> S cm<sup>-1</sup>, for example delafossite CuCrO<sub>2</sub>:Mg (conductivity 220 S cm<sup>-1</sup> with 30% transparency)<sup>12</sup> and layered cobaltate Bi<sub>2</sub>Sr<sub>2</sub>Co<sub>2</sub>O<sub>y</sub> (conductivity 222 S cm<sup>-1</sup> with 50% transparency)<sup>13</sup>. More recently, Zhang et al<sup>14</sup> have reported Sr-doped LaCrO<sub>3</sub> as a promising new p-type transparent conducting oxide, with LaSr<sub>0.25</sub>Cr<sub>0.75</sub>O<sub>3</sub> and LaSr<sub>0.5</sub>Cr<sub>0.5</sub>O<sub>3</sub> achieving conductivities of 15 S cm<sup>-1</sup> and 54 S cm<sup>-1</sup>, respectively, although it was noted that higher conductivities via increased dopant concentration can come at the expense of reduced transparency (54.2% and 42.3%, respectively). These values of conductivity are still two or three orders of magnitude lower than those achieved in n-type TCOs, such as ZnO:Al, In<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>:Sn or SnO<sub>2</sub>:F, which are in the range of 10<sup>4</sup> S cm<sup>-1</sup>.

The major shortcoming of p-type TCOs lies in their poor hole mobility. Despite the fact that high doping levels can be achieved<sup>15</sup>, the values of conductivity are inherently hindered by heavy effective masses<sup>16,17</sup> or by the highly localized nature of p and d states forming the valence band maximum (VBM), with

<sup>a</sup> School of Physics and CRANN, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland; E-mail: earca@tcd.ie

<sup>b</sup> School of Chemistry and CRANN, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland.

<sup>c</sup> Stephenson Institute for Renewable Energy and Department of Physics, School of Physical Sciences, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, L69 7ZF, UK

<sup>d</sup> University College London, Kathleen Lonsdale Materials Chemistry, Department of Chemistry, 20 Gordon Street, London WC1H 0AJ, UK

<sup>b</sup> Diamond Light Source Ltd., Diamond House, Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, Didcot, Oxfordshire OX11 0DE, UK

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‡ Present address: National Renewable Energy Laboratory, 15013 Denver West Parkway, Golden, Colorado 80401, United States

the latter leading to polaronic conductivities<sup>18–21</sup>. Only a few p-type TCOs have shown mobilities reproducibly higher than  $1 \text{ cm}^2\text{V}^{-1}\text{s}^{-1}$ , an example of which is  $\text{SnO}$ <sup>8,22,23</sup>.

Overcoming these limitations has stimulated intense research activity in the field, from both an experimental and a theoretical point of view.  $\text{CuAlO}_2$ , the first reported p-type TCO<sup>24</sup>, overcomes the limitations of hole localisation on O ions by combining semiconductor  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$  with transparent insulator  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  such that the Cu *d* states mix with the O *p* states in the valence band, promoting delocalisation. Various materials were considered over the past two decades include delafossite structures<sup>25–32</sup>, oxychalcogenides<sup>33–36</sup>, spinel structures<sup>37–40</sup>, cobaltates<sup>13</sup>, more complex or exotic structures such as  $\text{KAg}_{11}(\text{VO}_4)_4$ <sup>41</sup> and recently, Ha et al. have expanded the concept of Sn(II)-based oxide as suitable materials to achieve low effective mass p-type TCOs<sup>42</sup>.

Recently, we demonstrated the possibility of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  as p-type transparent semiconductor oxide, by doping it with Mg to improve its electrical conductivity and retain the transparency properties by introducing an ammonium precursor in the solution<sup>43,44</sup>. Lately,  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  has received considerable attention as a p-type transparent conductor<sup>44–48</sup>, with a few reports also discussing the possibility of n-type behavior in  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  by doping it with Ti<sup>49–52</sup>. While Mg is a popular choice in the literature as a hole dopant for  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ <sup>47,53,54</sup>, further improvement can be achieved if shallower acceptors than Mg are used. To this end, Ni has been considered<sup>54,55</sup>, with the highest conductivity of  $5 \text{ S cm}^{-1}$  recently achieved by Arca et al.<sup>46</sup>

In this contribution, we compare the effect of p-type dopants Mg and Ni in epitaxial  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  films. We show that Ni is a far more effective dopant than Mg, achieving conductivities an order of magnitude higher. Moreover, through a combination of crystallography, spectroscopy and density functional theory (DFT) calculations, we attempt to establish the origin of the improved conductivities and in particular the role of Ni as a more effective acceptor than Mg.

## 2 Experimental details

$\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  films were deposited on a single side polished sapphire (c- $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , (0001)-oriented) mono crystalline substrate using a pulsed laser deposition chamber (SURFACE) operating at a base pressure of  $5 \times 10^{-7}$  bar. A KrF laser ( $\lambda = 248 \text{ nm}$ ) was used at a repetition rate of 10 Hz. The laser density on the target was adjusted to be  $0.8 \text{ J cm}^{-2}$ . Ni-doped, Mg-doped and an undoped target were prepared by solid state reaction. Details of the target preparation are reported elsewhere<sup>46,47</sup>. For the deposition, different combinations of temperature and pressure were tested. Highest conductivity, while still preserving phase purity, were found using deposition temperature of 773 C and 923 C for Ni-doping and Mg-doping, respectively, and optimum deposition pressure of  $1 \times 10^{-4}$  bar for both dopants. For both target and thin films, the composition is expressed based on the cation ratio, i.e. the ratio  $M_{at}/(M_{at} + \text{Cr}_{at})$  where *M* is either Mg or Ni. After each deposition, films were subjected to structural characterization to verify the purity of the phase deposited. To this end, high resolution x-ray diffraction (HRXRD) was performed using a Bruker D8 Discover. The thickness of each individual sample

was determined by x-ray reflectivity (XRR). The effect of doping on the electronic properties of the films was determined by X-ray Photoelectron Spectroscopy (XPS) using an Omicron Multi-Probe XPS equipped with a monochromated Al  $K_{\alpha}$  x-ray source in conjunction with an Omicron EA 125 hemispherical analyser. A pass energy of 20 eV was used, which combined with detector and source resolutions, bring the resolution up to 0.5 eV. For undoped, insulating samples, an Omicron CN 10 charge neutralizer was used during XPS acquisition. Beam energy, emission current, and deflection were optimized to achieve a FWHM of the O 1s peak comparable to the line-width typical of samples not affected by charging (FWHM = 1.2 eV). Samples were loaded into the XPS chamber immediately after deposition to minimize contamination by exposure to atmospheric gases. We realigned all the spectra so that the aliphatic C meets the standard value of 285. The realignment was only of about 0.2 eV for all conductive samples, and for some of them, it was not even necessary as the signal of adventitious C was already coincident with a binding energy of 285 eV. Electrical characterization was performed in a 4 point probe apparatus using a linear configuration and computer controlled Keithley 2400 source meter. Conductivity values were calculated based on the sheet resistance and thickness measurements as determined by XRR. Additional microstructural and compositional characterization was performed by transmission electron microscopy (TEM). Lamellae were prepared using a gallium based Focused Ion Beam system (Carl Zeiss Auriga 40). A lamella was milled in the region of interest and was then placed on a TEM grid using the in situ lift out technique. The lifted out lamella was subsequently thinned to  $\sim 150 \text{ nm}$  with a 15 kV at 200 pA ion beam and then polished to  $\sim 50 \text{ nm}$  in the region of interest with a 5 kV at 20 pA ion beam. High-resolution TEM (HRTEM) images were acquired using a FEI Titan operated at 300 keV. Atomically resolved annular dark-field (ADF) scanning TEM (STEM) images were obtained using Nion UltraSTEM operated at 200 keV with collection angles of 99 – 200 mrad. Energy dispersive x-ray (EDX) maps were acquired using a Bruker 100 mm<sup>2</sup> windowless EDX available in the Nion UltraSTEM.

## 3 Computational details

All DFT calculations were carried out using the VASP package<sup>56–58</sup>, which models crystalline systems by using periodic boundary conditions and expanding crystal wave functions in terms of a plane wave basis set. Interactions between the core states (represented by atomic functions) and valence electrons (described by plane waves) are modelled using the projector augmented wave (PAW) method, with the cores defined here as Cr:[Ar], O:[He], Mg:[Be], and Ni:[Mg]. The PBE functional was used to describe exchange and correlation,<sup>59</sup> with  $+U$  values<sup>60</sup> to combat self-interaction error applied to the Cr 3*d* states, due to the highly localized nature of *d* states, and to the O 2*p* states, due to the importance of accurately modelling the typically O 2*p* dominated valence band of p-type oxides. *U* values of 3 eV and 5 eV, respectively, were derived from comparison to XPS spectra to best reproduce valence band shape and features as outlined in our previous study on Mg-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ .<sup>47</sup> A *U* of 5.3 eV was also

applied to the Ni *d* states, a value which has been widely used in the literature to model Ni oxide systems with PBE.<sup>61,62</sup> A *k*-point mesh of  $\Gamma$ -centred  $2 \times 2 \times 1$ , a plane wave cut-off of 400 eV, and a force convergence criterion of  $0.01 \text{ eV \AA}^{-1}$  were used to model the 120 atom  $2 \times 2 \times 1$  expansion of the 30 atom hexagonal unit cell. The formation energy ( $E_f(D, q)$ ) of a defect (*D*) in each of its possible charge states (*q*) was calculated according to Equation 1.

$$\Delta E_f(D, q) = (E^{D,q} - E^P) + \sum_i n_i (E_i + \mu_i) + q(E_{\text{Fermi}} + \epsilon_{\text{VBM}}^P) + E_{\text{align}} \quad (1)$$

The first term,  $E^{D,q} - E^P$ , is the difference in energy between the defective and pure systems. In the second term,  $n_i$  is the number of atoms of type *i* taken from or added to an external reservoir, as a function of both the elemental reference energies calculated from their standard states ( $E_i$ ) and chemical potentials to represent the equilibrium growth conditions ( $\mu_i$ ). The chemical potentials are found with reference to the PBE+*U* calculated formation energy of pure  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ ,  $-12.54 \text{ eV}$ . The formation energies of CrO and  $\text{CrO}_2$  were also calculated to determine if they are competing phases under O-poor or O-rich conditions, respectively, but this was found not to be the case. The O-rich chemical potential limits were thus calculated to be  $\mu_{\text{Cr}} = -6.27 \text{ eV}$  and  $\mu_{\text{O}} = 0 \text{ eV}$ , and the O-poor limits are  $\mu_{\text{Cr}} = 0 \text{ eV}$  and  $\mu_{\text{O}} = -4.18 \text{ eV}$ . For the doped systems,  $\mu_{\text{Mg}}$  and  $\mu_{\text{Ni}}$  were calculated using the formation energies of their parent oxides MgO and NiO, resulting in  $\mu_{\text{Mg}} = -3.53 \text{ eV}$  and  $\mu_{\text{Ni}} = -2.94 \text{ eV}$  under O-rich conditions and  $\mu_{\text{Mg}} = 0 \text{ eV}$  and  $\mu_{\text{Ni}} = 0 \text{ eV}$  in the O-poor regime.

The third term in Equation 1 includes the charge state of the defect and is dependent on the electron chemical potential ( $E_{\text{Fermi}}$ ) and the VBM eigenvalue of the pure system. Finally,  $E_{\text{align}}$  aligns the electrostatic potential between the pure and defective systems and corrects for finite-size effects in charged defect calculations,<sup>63</sup> with a value of 12.6 used for the dielectric constant based on the average of the experimentally reported values of 13.0 parallel to the *a* axis and 11.8 parallel to the *c* axis<sup>64</sup>. The thermodynamic transition levels of each defect are also calculated as in Equation 2, defined as the Fermi level at which different charge states *q* and *q'* of a particular defect have the same formation energy.

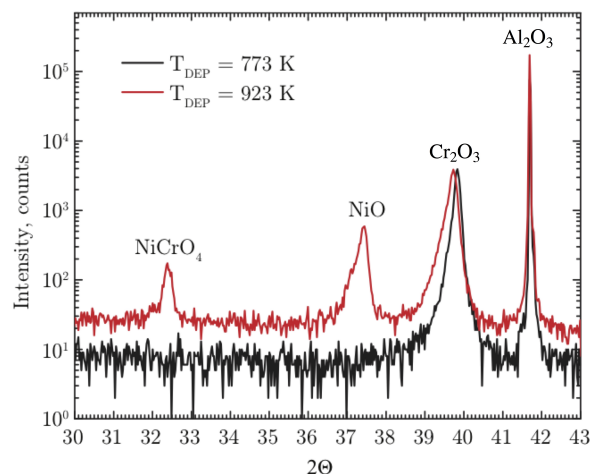
$$\epsilon_D(q/q') = \frac{\Delta E_f(D, q) - \Delta E_f(D, q')}{q' - q} \quad (2)$$

**All calculations were spin polarized. For all defects, all plausible alternative spin orderings were considered, with the lowest energy configurations used in the final diagram.**

## 4 Results

A target with a Ni cationic content of 7%at was prepared, with phase pure films achieved at a deposition temperature of 773 K. This temperature was chosen as spurious peaks were present in the XRD pattern at any other deposition temperature tested (823 K, 873 K and 923 K), as shown in Figure 1. These peaks, resulting from the formation of competing phases such as  $\text{NiCrO}_4$  and NiO, were not observed at any value of temperature tested

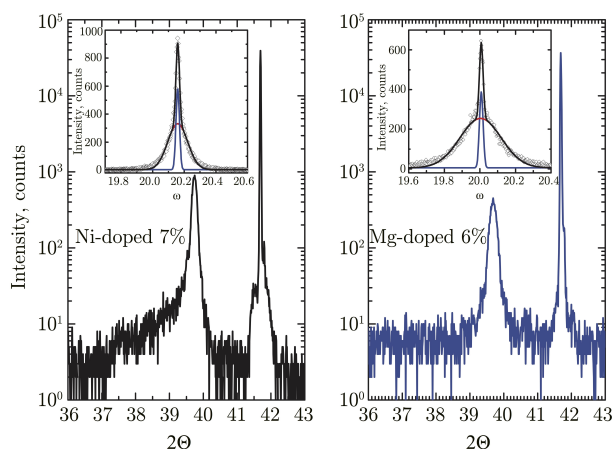
over the range 773 K to 873 K in our previous investigation using 5%at Ni-doped targets<sup>46</sup>. All data on Mg-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  presented herein is based on a target with a Cr:Mg ratio of 94:6, the concentration with which the best conductivities were achieved in our previous work<sup>47</sup>. **These concentration were found to be those at which no spurious phase were formed, and thus were taken to be the highest value of dopant that, experimentally, could be inserted in the material. The lack of spurious phase as determined by the XRD or TEM analysis was determined to be the solubility limit for both dopants.**



**Fig. 1** XRD pattern of Ni-doped films grown out of the 7%at target at 773 K (black) and 923 K (red). Samples grown at 823 K and 873 K show a very similar pattern to that recorded for the films deposited at 923 K.

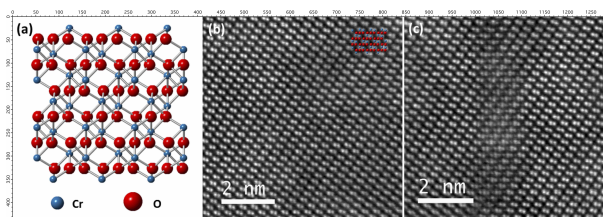
HRXRD patterns of both Ni-doped and Mg-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  are reported in Figure 2. Rocking curve measurements around the main  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  (006) reflection were performed to assess the defect density in both films. As shown in the inset in Figure 2, the line-shape can be reconstructed by using two Gaussian components. Similar to previous literature reports<sup>65,66</sup>, the broader component is attributed to a higher density of defects in the interface region between the substrate and the heteroepitaxial films, whereas the second sharper component is relative to the over-layer, whose density of defects is notably reduced. This is common to both the Mg- and Ni-doped films, and the relative full width at half maximum (FWHM) are comparable: the sharper and broader components for Mg-doped films have FWHM of 86 arcsec and 972 arcsec, respectively, while the same components for Ni-doped films have values of 93 arcsec and 540 arcsec, respectively. The values of FWHM of the sharpest component are thus comparable, which means that the density of structural defects is similar.

A decrease in the value of the *c* parameter is observed in both the case of Ni- (13.596 Å) and Mg-doping (13.614 Å) relative to the undoped films (13.650 Å). This shift may appear counterintuitive: while ionic radii can vary substantially depending on the coordination number, for a substitutional type of impurity and a coordination number of 6, both Mg(II) (86 pm) and Ni(II) (83 pm) are expected to have a higher ionic radius than Cr(III) (75.5 pm)<sup>67</sup>. This contraction of the crystallographic cell despite inserting ions of a higher ionic radii has been previously observed in the literature,



**Fig. 2** HRXRD of Ni-doped and Mg-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  films.

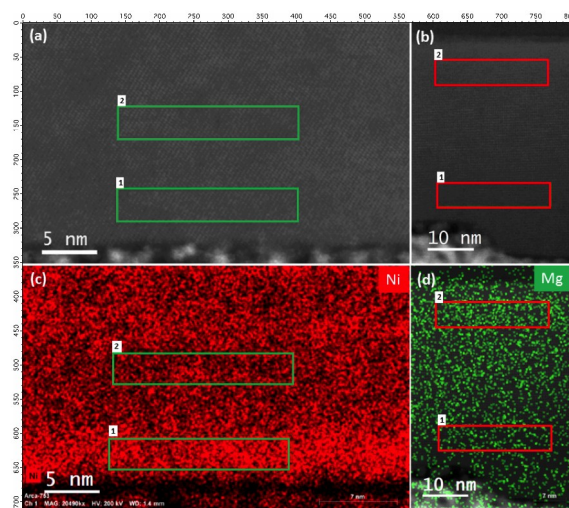
for example for  $\text{Cu}_{2-2x}\text{Zn}_x\text{O}$ ,<sup>68</sup>. The quality of both Ni- and Mg-doped samples was further analyzed by HRTEM and atomically resolved ADF STEM to assess if nanoclusters of spurious phases were present. The total area examined for Ni- and Mg doped lamellae is approximately  $700\text{nm} \times 70\text{nm}$  and  $700\text{nm} \times 40\text{nm}$ , respectively. Two large area images are shown in the Supplementary information 1 and 2. Additionally, the crystal structure of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  and two representative images of Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  obtained from ADF STEM are shown in Figure 3. No spurious phases have been detected, and only rare defective regions where interstitial atoms are clearly visible, have been observed for Ni doped films (Figure 3(c)). Similar results were observed for the Mg-doped sample, albeit without interstitial defects, as shown in the Supplementary Information Figure 3. HRTEM images (Supplementary Information 4 and 5) confirmed the absence of spurious phases. Notably, forbidden reflections are present in the Fast Fourier Transforms (FFT) of the HRTEM images. Their presence can be attributed to both dynamical scattering effects and the substitution of Ni or Mg on a Cr site. These results further support the conclusions drawn according the XRD analysis, confirming the absence of spurious phase even below the detection limit of the High Resolution diffractometer used for this study.



**Fig. 3** (a) Structure of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  along  $[100]$  direction, with Cr and O atoms shown in blue and red, respectively. (b) and (c) ADF STEM images of Ni doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  lamella showing respectively a region without any crystallographic defect and a region with interstitial atoms. Only Cr columns are visible in the images due to the strong Z-contrast.

The EDX mapping of the Ni and Mg distribution over a wide region, along with the corresponding ADF STEM images, is shown in Figure 4. As can be seen, Ni and Mg atoms are not homo-

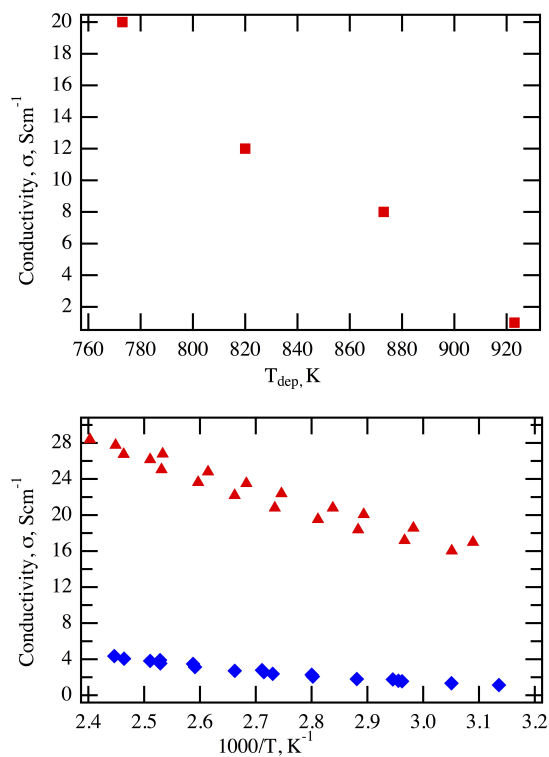
geneously distributed, and there are regions where the dopant tends to accumulate (such as Region 1 and 2 in respectively subfigure (c) and (d) of Figure 4) and regions that are poorer in Ni and Mg content (Region 2 and 1 in each subfigure of Figure 4). Ni concentration in these two regions was found by EDX to be 16%at and 11%at, respectively. Mg concentration in Regions 1 and 2 was found to be 6.6%at and 4.9%at, respectively. DFT calculations for a 12.5%at Ni-doped and a 8.3%at Mg-doped system were performed, in which it was found that it is energetically preferential to place all of the dopants adjacent to one another in clusters instead of being homogeneously distributed throughout the supercell, corroborating the inhomogeneous distributions of Ni and Mg experimentally found throughout the films. Notably, the EDX determined concentration of incorporated Mg is considerably lower than that of Ni despite their similar target compositions. Conductivity measurements were carried out on a large number of films prepared from the 7%at Ni target. Most samples were measured to have conductivities of around  $20\text{S cm}^{-1}$ , with the best samples reaching  $28\text{S cm}^{-1}$ . This is in comparison to the  $5 \pm 1\text{S cm}^{-1}$  previously measured for samples produced from a 5% Ni-doped target<sup>46</sup> and the  $1 \pm 0.1\text{S cm}^{-1}$  obtained from the 6%at Mg target, the highest conductivity achieved for Mg-doped films over a range of tested Mg concentrations in our previous work<sup>47</sup>.



**Fig. 4** ADF STEM images of (a) Ni-doped and (b) Mg-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  with corresponding EDX maps in (c) and (d), respectively, showing the variation in the Ni and Mg concentration across the sample. Regions marked 1 and 2 show areas of increased and decreased dopant concentration, respectively. Pt deposited on the surface of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  during lamellae preparation can be seen at the bottom of the images.

This therefore shows both that the higher Ni-doping concentration is conducive to better conductivity and that Ni-doping of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  results in an improvement in electronic conductivity of more than an order of magnitude over Mg-doping. Notably, the conductivity of samples prepared with the 7%at Ni target decreases significantly with increasing deposition temperature as competing phases are formed, as seen from Figure 5(a). The

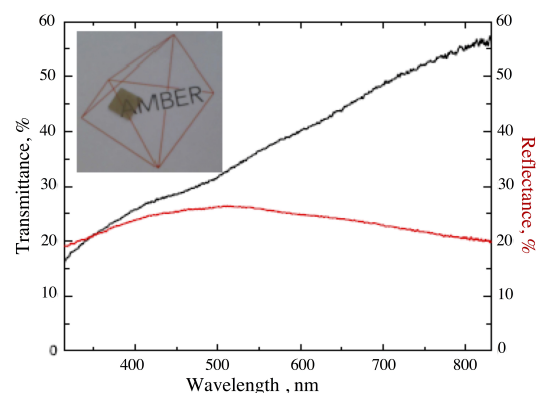
improvement in conductivity of Ni-doping versus Mg-doping is directly correlated to the lower activation energy observed for Ni-doping (70 meV as determined from the Arrhenius plot shown in Figure 5(b)) in comparison to the Mg-doping (170 meV). While the XRD pattern of the Ni doped samples having 20S/cm shown in Figure 1 are symmetric, the sample having 28S/cm show a non-perfectly symmetric peak. Variations in Ni concentrations together with small defective regions, as identified by TEM and EDX, are most likely the cause for the asymmetry in the XRD peak associated with this highly conductive sample, yet their presence seems to be non-deleterious for the electrical properties, as noted by the high conductivities of the films.



**Fig. 5** (Top panel) The conductivity of Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  prepared with a 7% Ni target as a function of deposition temperature and (Bottom panel) comparison between the Arrhenius plot of a Ni-doped (red triangles) and a Mg-doped (blue diamonds)  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  thin films.

The optical properties of the Ni-doped films are shown in Figure 6 and are comparable to those previously reported for the Mg-doped films<sup>47</sup>. Transmittance ranges from 55% to 35% across the visible range, with an average value of 40%, compared to 52% to 40% for Mg-doping<sup>47</sup>. A major limitation to transmittance is the reflectance loss due to the large difference between the refractive index of both air and sapphire in comparison to  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ , which is equal or higher than 20% across the entire spectral range.

Using DFT, the transition levels of a Mg ion on a Cr site, a Mg interstitial ion, a Ni ion on a Cr site, and a Ni interstitial ion were calculated, as shown in Figure 7. Multiple interstitial positions were tested, but the only location in which the dopant relaxed was the “vacant” cation site in the corundum structure, in which



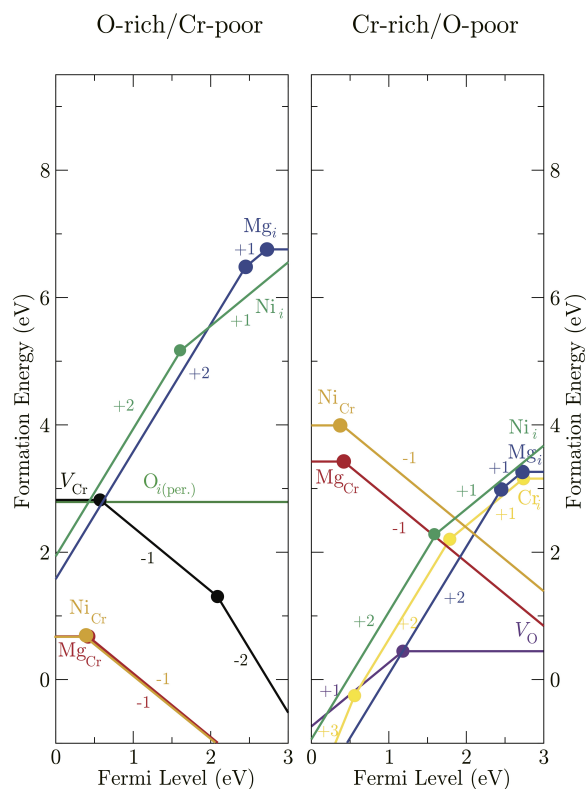
**Fig. 6** Visible transmittance (black line) and reflectance (red line) of a Ni-doped sample.

one third of the octahedral sites on the cation sublattice are unfilled. Defect formation energies were calculated under both O-rich/Cr-poor and O-poor/Cr-rich conditions using chemical potential limits as outlined above. The intrinsic defects with the lowest formation energy (O peroxide species in the O-rich regime and O vacancy in the O-poor) and the most shallow ionisation level (Cr vacancy and Cr interstitial for O-rich and O-poor conditions, respectively), as calculated in our previous work<sup>47</sup>, are shown for comparison.

In the O-rich regime, the Mg ion on a Cr site has a neutral state formation energy of 0.66 eV and a relatively shallow (for a  $p$ -type defect) 0/ $-1$  transition level of 0.42 eV. The Ni substitutional ion has a formation energy and first ionisation level of 0.67 eV and 0.40 eV, respectively. Notably, these values are very similar for both dopants. The  $n$ -type Mg interstitial and Ni interstitial have formation energies of 6.78 eV and 6.53 eV, respectively, far higher than the  $p$ -type substitution defects. The Mg and Ni dopant ions are therefore uncompensated across the span of the band gap, resulting in the experimentally observed  $p$ -type conductivity under O-rich conditions.

Under O-poor conditions, where  $n$ -type defects should be more favorable, the  $n$ -type Mg interstitial has a formation energy and a first ionisation level of 3.25 eV and 0.23 eV, respectively. Mg on a Cr site has a formation energy of 3.42 eV and a first ionisation level of 0.42 eV. An interesting effect of Mg-doping under O-poor conditions is that these two Mg related defects in  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  intersect on the transition level diagram, which would result in the Fermi level being trapped at 1.92 eV. Therefore, neither  $n$ - or  $p$ -type conductivity would be expected to be observed when the material is grown in an O-poor environment. A similar situation is observed for Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  under O-poor conditions. Ni on a Cr site has a formation energy of 4.00 eV and a first ionisation level of 0.40 eV. The Ni interstitial has its first transition in the conduction band (1.00 eV above the conduction band maximum), which would be advantageous for  $n$ -type conductivity were it not for the fact that the formation energy is prohibitively high at 4.59 eV. As with the Mg-doped system under O-poor conditions, the Fermi level is

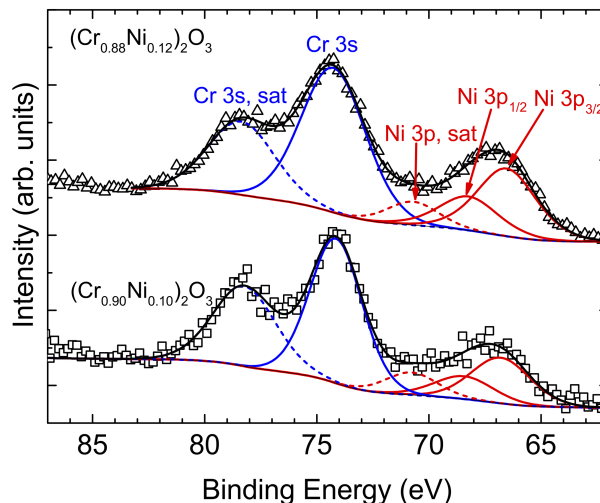
pinned mid-gap, in this case between the Ni on a Cr site and the Cr interstitial, at an energy of 1.99 eV. As such, for both Mg- and Ni-doping of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ , electronic conductivity is unlikely to occur when the materials are deposited under O-poor conditions, and only *p*-type conductivity should be observed in an O-rich regime.



**Fig. 7** Transition level diagrams of Mg and Ni interstitial and substitutional ions in  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ , under both O-rich and O-poor conditions.

The effect of Ni-doping on the electronic properties of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  was assessed by XPS. As XPS is a surface sensitive technique, the stoichiometry of the surface needs to be determined in order to assess if the XPS determined density of states are a good representation of the material's bulk properties. The Ni concentration at the surface was determined by deconvolution of the Cr 3s and Ni 3p peaks as shown in Figure 8 for the films grown using 5%at and 7%at doped targets. These were then compared to the bulk values as determined by EDX spectroscopy. The Cr 3s and Ni 3p photoelectrons were chosen as they have similar binding energies and approximately the same inelastic mean free path (IMFP) of  $\lambda \approx 3$  nm. According to the Beer-Lambert law, 95% of the XPS signal is from  $3\lambda = 9$  nm. Curve fitting Cr 3s and Ni 3p regions is complicated by the presence of satellite features associated with the well-known shake-up satellite peaks at higher binding energy than the main peaks. These features are consistent with previous reports for  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  and NiO and have been fitted in order to be included in determining the total Cr 3s and Ni 3p peak areas and applying the relative sensitivity factors for composition determination.

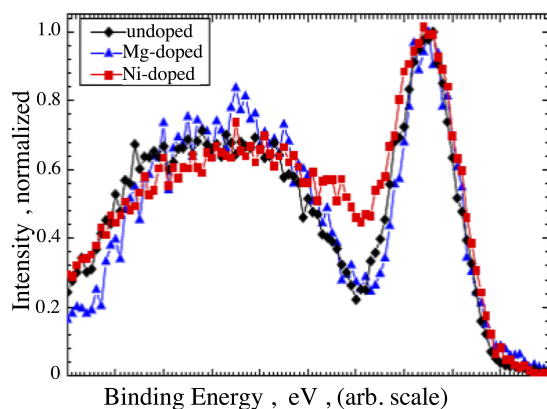
The surface concentration of Ni, as determined by the proportion of the cation sublattice was found to be 10%at and



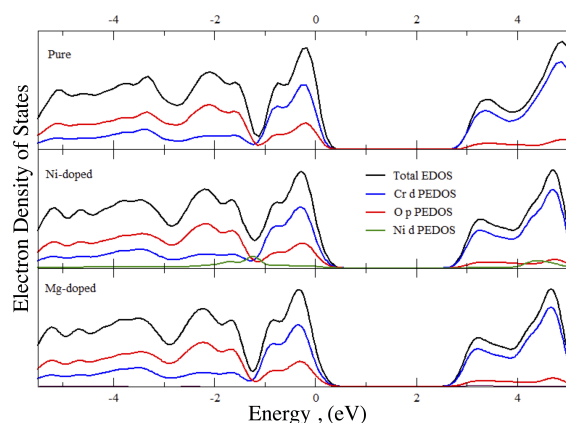
**Fig. 8** Deconvolution of the Cr 3s and Ni 3p peaks to determine the concentration of Ni at the surface.

12%at ( $\pm 2\%$ at) for films grown out using the 5%at and 7%at doped targets respectively. The surface concentration found in the films is in good agreement with the bulk determined concentration, which was found to be 13%at and 14%at, respectively ( $\pm 2\%$ at). Details of the fitting procedures and the parameters used to determine the surface composition, are reported in the Supplementary Information, Table I and II. The VBM for both Mg-doped and Ni-doped films were recorded and compared (Supplementary Information 6). The increased conductivity of the Ni-doped films is mirrored by a downwards shift of the Fermi level towards the valence band (VB) edge, which was found to be 0.2 eV above the VBM for both the 10%at and 12%at doped films<sup>46</sup> (Supplementary Information 6). For comparison, the undoped films have a Fermi level placed roughly 1 eV above the VB edge, whereas Mg induces a downwards shift of the Fermi level to 0.5 eV above the VB edge<sup>47</sup>. In addition, doping with Ni results in a noticeable modification of the overall shape of the VB. In order to highlight the differences, the VB shapes of undoped, Mg- and Ni-doped films were shifted to superimpose with one another as seen in Figure 9. Notably, the VB shapes of undoped and Mg-doped films are identical whereas the region of low density normally present between the Cr 3d and O 2p states is considerably less pronounced in the case of Ni doped films.

The electronic density of states (EDOS) were generated with DFT to examine the influence of Ni and Mg on the VB. The total and partial EDOS of undoped, Mg-doped, and Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  are shown in Figure 10. Notably, there is no interaction of the valence Mg s states with the VB of the host system as they are significantly lower in energy, while in the Ni-doped system, the Ni d states are present in the VB where they can mix with the O 2p states. This is in good agreement with the experimentally obtained XPS data, as the Ni 3d states occupy the energetic range of zero density observed in the Mg-doped system between 1 eV and 2 eV.



**Fig. 9** Comparison between the VB shape of an undoped, Mg-doped and Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  films. The graphs are shifted in order highlight the change in shape upon Ni-doping.



**Fig. 10** Total and partial EDOS of (a) undoped, (b) Mg-doped and (c) Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ . The top of the VB is aligned to 0 eV in all cases.

## 5 Discussion

Experimentally, it was demonstrated that Ni incorporation in  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  produces films with considerably higher conductivities than Mg-doped films, achieving values of 28 S/cm, which is higher than any  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  doped films previously reported in the literature. TCOs are often assessed using a ratio of electrical conductivity to visible absorption coefficient known as the figure of merit, calculated from the sheet resistance, total visible transmission, and total visible reflectance.<sup>69</sup> The figure of merit determined here for Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  is  $110 \text{ M}\Omega^{-1}$ . For comparison, the best n-type materials typically have values on the order of  $1 \Omega^{-1}$ , while other prospective p-type materials such as  $\text{CuCrO}_2:\text{Mg}$ ,  $\text{Bi}_2\text{Sr}_2\text{Co}_2\text{O}_y$ ,  $\text{LaSr}_{0.25}\text{Cr}_{0.75}\text{O}_3$  and  $\text{LaSr}_{0.5}\text{Cr}_{0.5}\text{O}_3$  have figures of merit of  $4600 \text{ M}\Omega^{-1}$ ,<sup>12</sup>  $800 \text{ M}\Omega^{-1}$ ,<sup>13</sup>  $196 \text{ M}\Omega^{-1}$ ,<sup>14</sup> and  $314 \text{ M}\Omega^{-1}$ ,<sup>14</sup> respectively. Indeed,  $\text{LaSr}_{0.25}\text{Cr}_{0.75}\text{O}_3$ , despite not having the highest figure of merit, was recently claimed as the best p-type TCO based on the compromise between optical

transparency and electrical conductivity.

To explain the improved conductivity of Ni-doped samples over Mg-doping, electrical measurements, structural characterization, spectroscopic measurements, and DFT calculations were performed. DFT calculations of the EDOS and experimentally determined XPS show a contribution of the Ni *d*-levels to the valence band, whereas Mg electronic levels do not contribute to it. The presence of Ni *d*-levels helps the delocalization of the formed holes, thus reducing the hole effective mass. The importance of a second cation in the formation of the VB and on the delocalization of the holes has been already proven for the case of  $\text{CuCrO}_2$ , where the effect is even more pronounced. Similar to the combination of  $\text{Cu}_2\text{O}$ 's conductivity and the transparency of  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  in delafossite p-type TCO  $\text{CuCrO}_2$ , we propose that combining transparent insulator  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  with semiconductor NiO can result in mixing of their valence bands to produce a viable p-type TCO, something that MgO, itself an insulator, cannot achieve when mixed with  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ .

In the case of the Ni-doped films, the improvement in hole delocalization is just a partial explanation for the increased conductivity. The second reason for such an improvement arises from the doping level. Mg has a limited solubility in  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ : 6.6% at cation substitution appears to be the maximum achievable, and any attempt to increase its concentration, either by varying the temperature or by increasing the Mg content in the target, resulted in phase separation. Conversely, Ni can be present in a considerably higher concentration (almost a factor of 3) without inducing phase separation. This high solubility is achieved by reducing the deposition temperature to a point where spurious phases are disfavored and the crystal quality of the  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  host-matrix is preserved. From a thermodynamic point of view, it would be expected that Mg and Ni should have comparable solubility, considering that DFT calculations show comparable formation energy. However, it has been shown that for some systems, non-equilibrium growth conditions can induce a considerable increase in the solubility of dopants, generating metastable compositions<sup>70–72</sup>. At very high doping concentrations, the Ni atoms are prone to aggregate. This is clearly shown in the modulation of the Ni distribution in the  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  lamella, with layers of higher and lower Ni concentration that develop along the *c*-axis, further supported by the DFT calculations, which show that the system with all the dopant positioned close to each other has a lower energy than the system where the dopant atoms are homogeneously distributed.

## 6 Conclusion

A complementary experimental and theoretical investigation has been adopted to compare the potential of Mg- and Ni-doped  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$  as p-type TCOs and to rationalise the observed higher conductivity of the Ni-doped samples over the Mg-doping. It was found that Ni is very effective p-type dopant in  $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ , capable of reaching conductivities of 28 S/cm. Both theoretical and experimental data has demonstrated that one of the major differences between the two dopants is the capability of Ni to contribute to the VB, contrary to Mg, whose electronic levels lie too deep. Ni contribution to the VB induces better delocalization of the formed

holes and thus a lower effective mass. Formation energies and transition levels for a p-type defect whereby Ni/Mg replace a Cr atom in the structure are very similar in both cases and thus one could expect similar acceptor concentrations. However, it has been experimentally shown that Ni has a much higher solubility in Cr<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub> than Mg under certain non-equilibrium conditions, and its concentration is almost three times higher. The mixing of Ni states with the VB of the host material and the concomitant increase in the dopant concentration explain the improvement in the electrical properties of the material.

## Authors contribution

E.A designed and synthesized the material, performed structural, optical and electrical measurements; A.B.K, D.O.S, G.W.W. performed the DFT calculations; T.D.V. performed the XPS analysis; A.S, C.D., D.D., V.N. performed the TEM and EDX analysis; D.M. I.V. S. contributed to the electrical measurements. There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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