

COMMUNICATION

Hybrid photocathode based on Ni molecular catalyst and Sb_2Se_3 for solar H_2 production

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We report the first H_2 hybrid photocathode based on Sb_2Se_3 and a precious metal free catalyst, NiP. Through the use of a high surface area TiO_2 scaffold, we successfully increased the NiP molecular catalyst loading from 7.08 ± 0.43 to 45.76 ± 0.81 nmol cm^{-2} , achieving photocurrents of 1.3 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE, which is 81-fold higher than the device without the TiO_2 mesoporous layer.

Photoelectrodes for the production of solar fuels, for example by splitting water to generate H_2 and O_2 ,¹ have the potential to play a key role in future energy systems. However, advances in both photoanodes for water oxidation² and photocathodes for hydrogen evolution (HER) are needed to improve the stability and to lower the cost for industrial scaling, since most long-lasting devices rely on precious metals.^{3–5} Sb_2Se_3 has recently gained interest from the photovoltaic (PV) community due to its near-direct band gap of 1.18 eV, a high absorption coefficient across the visible region,⁶ and an unusual 1D nanoribbon structure that enables effective charge transport.⁷ These properties, combined with improvements in material processability and the use of earth-abundant elements, have led to the suggestion that Sb_2Se_3 could be a viable thin film PV material for use on a global scale.⁸ Sb_2Se_3 has also been studied as a photocathode for HER, the conduction band minimum at -0.5 V vs RHE provides enough driving force for producing H_2 ,⁹ and its band gap (E_g) is very close to the optimal calculated for the bottom electrode in dual absorber standalone device for water splitting.¹⁰ Reported solar to hydrogen efficiencies, using state-of-the-art Sb_2Se_3 photocathodes, have now exceeded 10%.^{11,12} With these photocathodes a $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}$ buried

junction is coated in a protective TiO_2 capping layer. The planar TiO_2 is then modified with a HER catalyst like Pt,^{13,14} RuO_2 ,^{12,15} and MoS_x .¹⁶ Notably, even with state-of-the-art devices, reductive dissolution of TiO_2 caused by photoelectron accumulation can occur.^{11,13} C_{60} between TiO_2 and the H_2 catalyst can alleviate charge accumulation promoting the photoelectron transfer at the TiO_2/Pt interface, but device stabilities are still low.^{11,13} Therefore, a need still exists to identify new active photoelectrode/catalysts systems that are able to keep up with the rate of photoelectron generation and to explore how the catalyst/ TiO_2 interface can be modified to prevent the generation of high-electron densities. Earth abundant molecular electrocatalysts have not previously been explored on Sb_2Se_3 photocathodes, even though they are an alternative to precious metal electrocatalysts and could

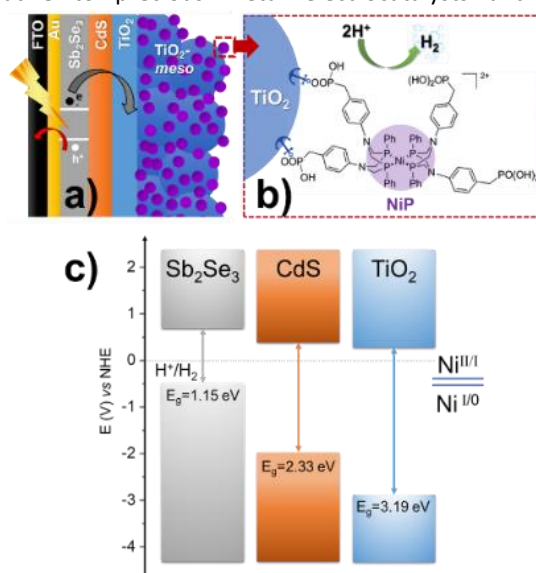


Fig 1 (a) Schematic diagram of $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ hybrid photocathode (b) chemical structure of NiP catalyst molecular catalyst, panel a and b are not drawn to scale. (c) Equilibrium band alignment diagram of $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2$ heterojunction based on VBM¹¹ and E_g measured separately for each layer (Fig. S2.1), note that NiP redox couple is pH independent.²¹

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potentially offer improved rates of charge transfer at the semiconductor/molecular catalyst interface.^{17,18} Here, **NiP** with a $[\text{Ni}(\text{P}_2\text{R}'\text{N}_2\text{R}'')_2]^{2+}$ core ($\text{P}_2\text{R}'\text{N}_2\text{R}'' = \text{bis}(1,5\text{-R}'\text{-diphospha-3,7-R}''\text{-diazacyclooctane})$), shown in Fig 1b) was chosen as model molecular catalyst.¹⁹ The **NiP** bio-inspired catalyst mimics the hydrogenase intramolecular proton transfer to the Ni centre through the pendant amine groups in the second coordination sphere.²⁰ Furthermore, it can be covalently anchored to TiO_2 by the phosphonic acid groups in the outer coordination sphere, Fig 1a.²¹

The complete device $\text{FTO}/\text{Au}/\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ is shown in Fig 1a. Sb_2Se_3 (1.5 μm) was deposited on Au (70 nm) coated fluorine doped SnO_2 -glass (FTO) by a two-step fast-cooling close space sublimation process, which generates a compact preferentially orientated nanoribbon crystal structure that facilitates rapid hole transfer to the Au contact.^{7,11,12} Then, a thin sputtered CdS buffer layer (20 nm) was added which forms a Sb_2Se_3 heterojunction with a negligible conduction band offset, thereby allowing efficient charge separation and electron transfer towards the TiO_2 (Fig 1c).⁶ In this way, the onset potential and fill factor of the Sb_2Se_3 photocathodes are improved despite the parasitic absorption of photons below $\lambda < 500$ nm in the CdS causing a decrease in the photocurrent.^{11,12} After, TiO_2 (100 nm) was sputtered to provide a physical barrier preventing contact between the light absorber and the electrolyte.²² Full details of the synthetic procedures, the device characterisation and SEM images are provided in the supporting information, Figs S2.1-3.

The molecular catalyst was first immobilized overnight onto the sputtered TiO_2 (without the $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$) by soaking the photoelectrode in dry methanolic solution (0.5 mM **NiP**),^{19,23,24} and from now on labelled as $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiP}$. It was removed from the soaking solution, thoroughly washed in methanol to remove the non-chemisorbed catalyst and dried under vacuum. **NiP** loadings were determined by stripping the catalyst off using NaOH and then quantified by UV-vis spectroscopy, as shown in Table S1. When **NiP** was attached to the sputtered TiO_2 layer, a loading of 7.08 ± 0.43 nmol cm^{-2} was achieved. All the photoelectrochemical tests were done under 100 mW cm^{-2} illumination (unless otherwise stated) and with $\lambda > 340$ nm in 0.1 M Na_2SO_4 at pH 3. pH 3 was chosen due to past studies that showed **NiP** was most active at this pH.^{23,25} Figure 2 shows a photocurrent of only $-16 \mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$ at 0 V vs RHE, which exceeds only slightly the current in the absence of any catalyst ($-3 \mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$ for $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2$, Fig S2.4). The spikes in the light chopped Linear Sweep Voltammetry (LSV) of $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiP}$ demonstrated that the photoelectrons are not being utilised at a fast-enough rate by the catalyst, instead recombination is dominating.²⁶

The low photocurrent of the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiP}$ electrode is due to the low loading of **NiP** compared with previous devices.^{23,24} A common approach to achieve higher catalyst loadings on a photoelectrode is to increase the available surface area for catalyst binding by using a mesoporous TiO_2 layer ($\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$). Typically, following deposition of a TiO_2 nanoparticle-organic binder paste, thermal annealing is carried out in air (~ 450 °C) to remove the binder and sinter the TiO_2 nanoparticles

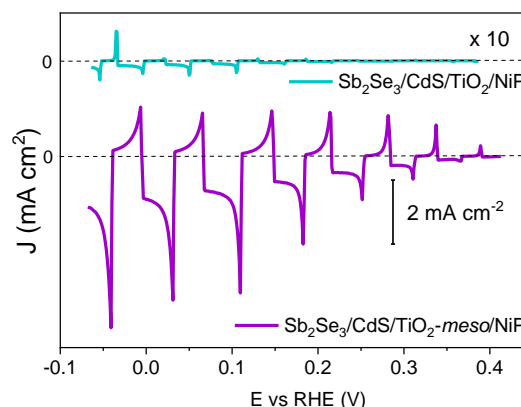


Fig 2: Chopped light LSV of the hybrid photocathodes $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiP}$ (blue trace) and $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ (purple trace) at 10 mV s^{-1} . The $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ enables a higher loading of the **NiP** catalysts and increased photocurrents. All experiments were carried out in 0.1 M Na_2SO_4 pH 3 at 100 mW cm^{-2} and $\lambda > 340$ nm.

forming conductive pathways.²⁶ Sb_2Se_3 is unstable at these temperatures in air,⁸ therefore we modified a UV curing approach successfully developed by the Grätzel group for $\text{CuO}_2/\text{AZO}/\text{TiO}_2$ photocathodes.²⁷ Following doctor blading of an anatase TiO_2 paste (av. particle size 20 nm diameter) the sample was UV cured for 68 h using a 365 nm LED, Fig S2.5. Note that the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ also included the sputtered 100 nm TiO_2 layer since it was found to be essential during the UV curing to protect the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}$. The photocathode was then annealed at lower temperature (350 °C) under N_2 to improve the electrochemical properties of the $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ layer (Fig S2.6-7) without hindering the light absorber capabilities (Fig S2.9). The $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ was ca. 4-6 μm thick determined by profilometry, the cross-sectional image and Energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (EDX) maps are shown Fig 3a and S2.10, respectively. Neither the UV curing nor the N_2 annealing alone resulted in a $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ layer with electrical and mechanical features suitable for a molecular catalyst scaffold (Fig S2.5, S2.8). The **NiP** immobilization on the $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ device was carried out using the same experimental protocol than the planar structure. The resultant $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ photocathode achieved an increased **NiP** loading (45.76 ± 0.81 nmol cm^{-2}), in line with the literature.²⁴ Top view EDX mapping shows the catalyst is evenly distributed on the photocathode surface (Fig S2.11). X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) analysis of the **NiP** on the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ electrode is shown in Fig 3b-d. The energies of the Ni 2p (Fig 3b, $\frac{1}{2}$ at 872.1 eV and $\frac{3}{2}$ at 854.6 eV), P 2p (Fig 3c, 132.6 eV) and N 1s (Fig 3d, 399.6 eV) peaks are in good agreement with the **NiP** catalyst prior to immobilisation (all the XPS peak positions are shown in Table S2).²³⁻²⁵ The complete $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ photocathode achieves a photocurrent of -1.3 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE with an onset potential of ca. +0.37 V vs RHE (Fig 2). The photocurrent for this electrode structure is amongst the highest reported for a **NiP** decorated photocathode, Table S3 provides the state-of-the-art hybrid photocathodes for H_2 production. **NiP** has been previously used with a $\text{Si}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ photocathode to achieve a photocurrent of -0.3 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE²⁴ and

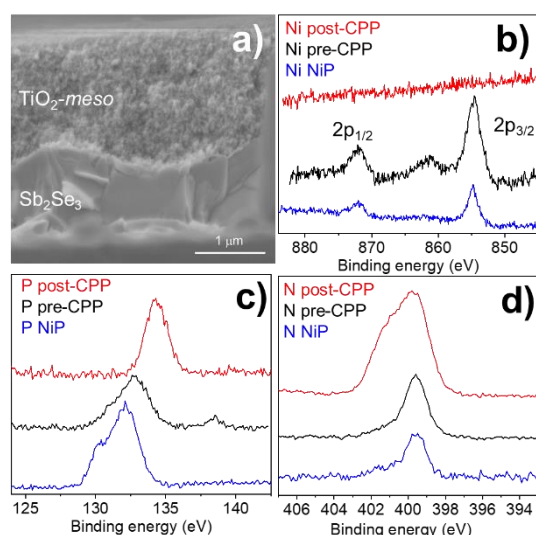


Fig 3 (a) Cross-sectional SEM image of $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$. XPS spectra of NiP molecular catalyst (blue trace) after it is immobilized on TiO_2 (pre-CPP, black trace), and after 5 h of CPP test at 0 V vs NHE (post-CPP, red trace) with light intensity of 100 mW cm^{-2} and $\lambda > 340 \text{ nm}$ in $0.1 \text{ M Na}_2\text{SO}_4$ at pH 3. (b, c, d) XPS spectra showing Ni 2p, P 2p and N 1s regions respectively.

-0.6 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE for a $\text{La}_5\text{Ti}_2\text{Cu}_{0.9}\text{Ag}_{0.1}\text{S}_5\text{O}_7/\text{TiO}_2$ photocathode.²³ A control experiment without the catalyst ($\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$, Fig S2.4) demonstrates the importance of the NiP catalyst, it showed a photocurrent of only -0.12 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE. Incident photon to current efficiency (IPCE, Fig S2.12) demonstrates the device is active at wavelengths up to 900 nm (at 0 V vs RHE), in-line with the E_g of Sb_2Se_3 .^{6,7} Controlled potential photoelectrolysis (CPP) carried out at 0 V vs RHE assessed the stability of the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ electrode, results shown in Fig 4. The H_2 Faradaic efficiency after 1 h was $77.5 \pm 9.1\%$, giving a TON_{NiP} of 12.8 ± 2.8 . However, the photocurrent decreased significantly in the first hour reaching $-40 \mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$ and by 5 hours, it decreased to only $-15 \mu\text{A cm}^{-2}$ (Fig S2.13). The loss of photoactivity of NiP photoelectrodes has previously been attributed to the hydrolysis of the phosphonic anchoring group from the TiO_2 .^{23,24} XPS analysis of the hybrid photocathode post CPP shows the loss of the Ni^{2+} bands (red trace, Fig 3b). However, it is clear that both the N 1s and P 2p signals are still present, although significantly shifted. A

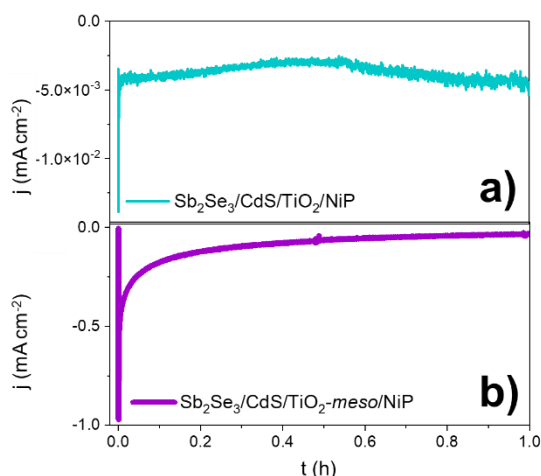


Fig 4 CPP at 0 V vs RHE of the hybrid photocathodes $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2/\text{NiP}$ (a) and $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ (b) in $0.1 \text{ M Na}_2\text{SO}_4$ pH 3 at 100 mW cm^{-2} and $\lambda > 340 \text{ nm}$.

broadening of the N 1s band has previously been assigned to protonation of the amine in the acidic electrolyte²³ and the shifting of the P band is due to the loss of the metal centre.²⁸ The XPS results suggest the phosphonate linkage has been retained but the Ni is no longer coordinated to the ligand, in-line with the stability of the phosphonate linkage at $\text{pH} < 7$.²⁹ Past studies have shown that NiP degradation occurs on photocathodes but with a slower decay rate.^{23,24}

To explore the mechanism of the hybrid photocathode decay here, we examined the $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ interface (without $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}$). CPE at -0.24 V vs RHE (Fig S2.7b), shows that following an initial drop in the current in the first 600 s, the electrode maintains a stable current of -0.24 mA cm^{-2} for 1h suggesting that the $\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ interface is stable at this potential and capable of dealing with low current density. However, the current spikes observed with $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ when the light is turned off in Fig 2 are typical features of electron accumulation in the TiO_2 , suggesting that the NiP catalyst was unable to turnover at the rate of photoelectron generation under 100 mW cm^{-2} illumination. Based on the concentration of immobilised NiP ($45.76 \pm 0.81 \text{ nmol cm}^{-2}$), and the highest reported turnover frequency of NiP ($460 \pm 5 \text{ h}^{-1}$),²¹ we calculate that the NiP on the surface could support a photocurrent of -1.15 mA cm^{-2} . This magnitude of photocurrent is achieved briefly in the LSV, but CPP shows the photocurrent decreases rapidly as the NiP catalyst degrades. To assess the photoelectron generation of $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$, we used Pt as co-catalyst (see ESI for synthetic details, Fig S2.14). The $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{Pt}$ electrode achieved a stable photocurrent of -3 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE for 5 hours. It is clear that the rate of photoelectron generation at the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}$ interface greatly exceeds the maximum current density that NiP can sustain. The catalytic mechanism of NiP is shown in figure S2.15,²⁰ H_2 production occurs following the $\text{Ni}^{\text{II/I}}$ reduction. Further reduction from Ni^{I} to Ni^0 can also potentially occur deactivating the catalyst if the rate of photoelectron generation is too high.³⁰ To explore if limiting the photoelectron generation on the Sb_2Se_3 would be beneficial, experiments at 20 mW cm^{-2} (Fig S2.16, 17) were carried out. Notably, only a small decrease in photocurrent was observed from 1.30 to 0.81 mA cm^{-2} at 0 V vs RHE, and 20% of photocurrent was retained after 1800 s compared with the 11% at 100 mW cm^{-2} .

Past studies using precious metal HER catalysts like Pt on planar TiO_2 coated Sb_2Se_3 photocathodes have noted that dissolution of TiO_2 can also occur due to photoelectron accumulation.^{11,13} The SEM images post-CPP $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ electrodes (tested at 100 mW cm^{-2}) did not show significant change in the morphology of the device (Fig S2.18) despite the demonstration of electron accumulation in the device. XRD analysis of a post-CPP sample only showed the typical peaks of Sb_2Se_3 and TiO_2 (Fig S2.19) and no indication of Sb_2O_3 formation, which has been associated with the deactivation of the Sb_2Se_3 photoelectrodes (Fig S2.20).^{12,13} However experiments where (i) $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ underwent LSV and CPP at 0 V vs RHE for 1h, (ii) removal of any remaining NiP by NaOH stripping, and (iii) Pt addition and photoelectrochemical testing showed evidence of partial failure of the sputtered TiO_2 layer due to

photoelectron accumulation. Significantly higher dark currents ($< -5 \text{ mA cm}^{-2}$, Fig S2.21) and decreased photocurrents were measured compared to a pristine platinized photoelectrode, reinforcing the importance of preventing photoelectron accumulation in the $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}/\text{NiP}$ photocathode.

Conclusions

Emergent chalcogenides semiconductors such as Sb_2Se_3 are promising photocathodes due to their ability to achieve a high rate of photoelectron generation but they suffer from thermal instability limiting processing opportunities. Furthermore, Sb_2Se_3 interfaces need to be protected by metal oxide capping layers where corrosion could occur due to photoelectron accumulation. To prevent electron accumulation research has focused on the use of these absorbers with precious metal HER catalysts. Here we present an alternative approach using a $\text{Sb}_2\text{Se}_3/\text{CdS}/\text{TiO}_2\text{-meso}$ photocathode. The high surface area TiO_2 support, prepared by a UV and low temperature N_2 annealing process that is compatible with Sb_2Se_3 , enables a high loading of an earth abundant molecular HER catalyst, NiP. An 81-fold increase in the photocurrent was achieved when compared to a similar device without the mesoporous TiO_2 . Despite the high catalyst loading, stability and activity under 100 mW cm^{-2} is still limited by the turnover frequency of the HER catalyst. However, initial experiments under low light intensities indicate that improved stability are achievable with further advances in the catalytic turnover frequency.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare

Acknowledgments

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