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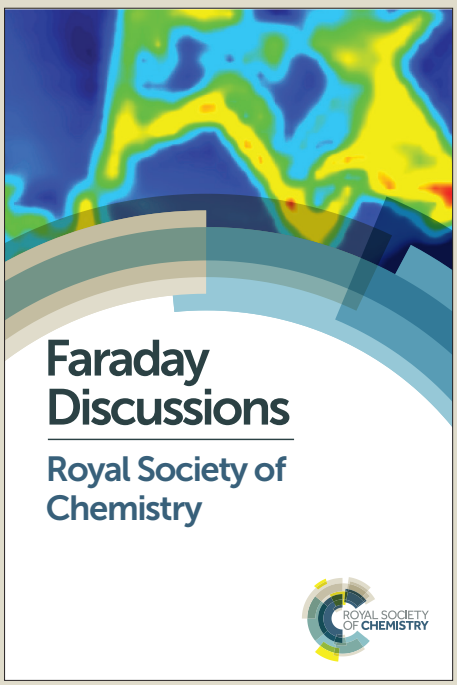

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Triboelectric nanogenerators as new energy technology and self-powered sensors – principles, problems and perspectives

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Triboelectrification is one of the most common effects in our daily life, but it is usually taken as a negative effect with very limited positive applications. Here, we invented a triboelectric nanogenerator (TENG) based on organic materials that is used to convert mechanical energy into electricity. The TENG is based on the conjunction of triboelectrification and electrostatic induction, and it utilizes the most common materials available in our daily life, such as papers, fabrics, PTFE, PDMS, Al, PVC etc. In this short review, we first introduce the four most fundamental modes of TENG, based which a range of applications have been demonstrated. The area power density reaches 1200 W/m^2, volume density reaches 490 kW/m^3, and an energy conversion efficiency of ~50-85% has been demonstrated. The TENG can be applied to harvest all kinds of mechanical energy that is available in our daily life, such as human motion, walking, vibration, mechanical triggering, rotation energy, wind, moving automobile, flowing water, rain drop, tide and ocean waves. Therefore, it is a new paradigm for energy harvesting. Furthermore, TENG can be a sensor that directly converts a mechanical triggering into a self-generated electric signal for detection of motion, vibration, mechanical stimuli, physical touching, and biological movement. After a summary of TENG for micro-scale energy harvesting, mega-scale energy harvesting, and self-powered systems, we will present a set of questions that need to be discussed and explored for TENG's applications. Lastly, since the energy conversion efficiencies for each mode can be different although the materials are the same, depending on the triggering conditions and design geometry. But one common factor that determines the performance of all the TENGs is the charge density on the two surfaces, the saturation value of which may independent of the triggering configurations of the TENG. Therefore, the triboelectric charge density or the relative charge density in reference to a standard material (such as polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE)), can be taken as a measuring matrix for characterizing the performance of the material for the TENG.

1. Introduction

A drastic change occurred in the world in the last two decades is the fast development of portable and personal electronics, which is now even shifting toward wearable electronics. A unique character of this technology trend is the huge increase in the number of electronic devices/systems, in a total of billions to trillions, each of which requires a mobile power source. The most traditional approach is to use batteries to power these electronics, which is likely to face a few possible consequences. First, a battery has a limited

life time, replacing the battery for each component becomes a huge task, especially, how do we know it is out of power, when should we replace the battery, who will replace the battery, etc. This is not a problem if the number of batteries is limited, but the situation drastically changes if the number of batteries to be replaced becomes huge. Secondly, with the use of huge amount of batteries, recycling of these batteries become a major task, because widely distributed batteries will inevitably cause environmental issues if the chemicals for making the batteries are leaked out.

The trend in the development of portable electronics is toward low power consumption, which makes it possible to use the energy harvested from the working environment of the device to directly power the device, forming a trend of self-powered system [1] for application in ultrasensitive chemical and bimolecular sensors, nanorobotics, micro-electromechanical systems, remote and mobile environmental sensors, homeland security and even portable/wearable personal electronics. New technologies that can harvest energy from the environment as sustainable self-sufficient micro/nano-power sources are newly emerging field of nanoenergy, which is about the applications of nanomaterials and nanotechnology for harvesting energy for powering micro/nano-systems.[2] The objective of this paper is to give a review about the fundamentals of triboelectric nanogenerator (TENG) [3] and its updated progress and potential applications as a new energy technology and as self-powered active sensors.[4]

2. Fundamental principle modes of triboelectric nanogenerators

The triboelectric effect is about a phenomenon that a material becomes electrically charged after it is contacted with a different material through friction, which has been known for thousands of years. Although this is one of the most frequently experienced effect that each and every one of us inevitably uses every day, the mechanism behind triboelectrification is still being studied possibly with debate. It is generally believed that after two different materials coming into contact, a chemical bond is formed between some parts of the two surfaces, called adhesion, and charges move from one material to the other to equalize their electrochemical potential. The transferred charges can be electrons or may be ions/molecules. When separated, some of the bonded atoms have a tendency to keep extra electrons, and some a tendency to give them away, possibly producing triboelectric charges on surfaces. The presence of triboelectric charges on dielectric surfaces can be a driven force for driving electrons in the electrode to flow in order to balance the created electric potential drop. Based on such a principle, we have invented four different modes of TENGs, as elaborated in follows.

2.1 Vertical contact-separation mode

We use the simplest design of TENG as an example (Fig. 1a).[5, 6] Two dissimilar dielectric films face with each other, and there are electrode being deposited on the top and the bottom surfaces of the stacked structure. A physical contact between the two dielectric films creates oppositely charged surfaces. Once the two surfaces are separated by a small gap under the lifting of an external force, a potential drop is created. If the two electrodes are electrically connected by a load, free electrons in one electrode would flow to the other electrode to build an opposite potential in order to balance the electrostatic field. Once the gap is closed, the triboelectric charge created potential disappears, the electrons flow back. [7]

2.2 Lateral sliding mode

The structure to start with is the same as that for the vertical contact-separation mode. When two dielectric films are in contact, a relative sliding in parallel to the surface also creates triboelectric charges on the two surfaces (Fig. 1b).[8, 9] A lateral polarization is thus introduced along the sliding direction, which drives the

electrons on the top and bottom electrodes to flow in order to fully balance the field created by the triboelectric charges. A periodic sliding apart and closing generates an AC output. This is the sliding mode TENG. The sliding can be a planar motion, a cylindrical rotation,[10] or disc rotation. [11] Related theoretical studies have been carried out for understanding the basic mode and grating structured TENG.[12, 13]

2.3 Single-electrode mode

The two modes introduced in sections 2.1 and 2.2 have two electrodes interconnected by a load. Such TENGs can freely move so that it can work for mobile cases. In some cases, the object that is part of the TENG cannot be electrically connected to the load because it is a mobile object, such as a human walking on a floor. In order to harvest energy from such a case, we introduced a single electrode TENG, in which the electrode on the bottom part of the TENG is grounded (Fig. 1c). If the size of the TENG is finite, an approaching or departing of the top object from the bottom one would change the local electrical field distribution, so that there are electron exchanges between the bottom electrode and the ground to maintain the potential change of the electrode. This energy harvesting strategy can be in both contact-separation mode [14] and contact-sliding mode. [15, 16]

2.4 Freestanding triboelectric-layer mode

In nature, a moving object is naturally charged due to its contact with air or other object, such as our shoes walking on floors that are usually charged. The charges remain on surface for hours and the contact or friction is unnecessary within this period of time because the charge density reaches a maximum. If we make a pair of symmetric electrode underneath a dielectric layer and the size of the electrodes and the gap distance between the two are of the same order as the size of the moving object, the object's approaching to and/or departing from the electrodes create an asymmetric charge distribution in the media, which causes the electrons to flow between the two electrodes to balance the local potential distribution (Fig. 1d).[17] The oscillation of the electrons between the pair electrodes produces power. The moving object does not have to be directly touch the top dielectric layer of the electrodes, so that, in rotation mode, a free rotation is possible without direct mechanical contact, so that the wearing of the surfaces can be drastically reduced. This is a good approach for extend the durability of the TENGs. Using such a design, we have demonstrated the harvesting of energy from human walking and a mobile automobile,[17] showing the potential for harvesting energy from a freely moving object without an electric connection.

3. Applications of TENGs

Based on the four modes illustrated above, we have fabricated various TENGs depending on specific applications. Figure 2 shows a collection of photographs of TENGs we have fabricated for harvesting various types of energy. These structures are the fundamental units for providing micro-scale power for small electronics, the assembly and integration of them can be the basis of harvesting mega-scale energy.

3.1 TENG as micro-scale power source

The first goal of developing TENG is to power small electronics for sensor network. Using the four modes demonstrated above and their combinations, a range of energy harvesting has been demonstrated from cases such as body motion,[18] fabrics,[19, 20] vibrations from human walking, [21] hand pressing,[22, 23] shoe insole,[24, 25] vibration of a string or tree branch,[26] vibration of a machine,[27, 28] elastic energy in sponge structure,[29] sound wave in air [30] and in water.[31]

The mechanical action can be either linearly or in rotation mode. By designing a grating structure, we can effectively lower the output voltage and largely increase the output current, which is required for high efficient of charging an energy storage unit. An energy conversion efficiency of 50% has been

demonstrated for sliding mode TENG [32] and 24% for a rotation based TENG, [33] and the output power density reaches as high as 1200 W/m^2. Such a power output is high enough for powering small electronics, establishing its solid foundation for self-powered systems.

3.2 TENG as macro-scale power source

By using the contact-electrification between a liquid and a solid surface as well as the packaged TENGs,[34] we have shown that TENGs can be used for harvesting energy from flowing water in river, rain drop,[35, 36] tide and ocean waves. Using the four fundamental modes presented above, we have successfully harvested the kinetic energy such as the up and down fluctuation of water surface,[37] water wave, water stream and the impact of water to shores.[38] Such structures can be used to harvest water energy from creeks without building a dam. Looking in to the future, by constructing a three-dimensional network of the TENGs, such as a 3D fishing net, as schematically shown in Fig. 3, if the output of each unit is 1 mW on average,[39, 40] our calculation shows that 1 MW power can be generated using 1 km square of surface area in ocean, possibly provides a feasible blue energy for large-scale energy needs of the world in near future.

Using the contact-separation mode, a mechanical resonance of a polymer film between two dielectrics can be used to harvest wind energy.[41] If we can build a wall and solve the problem of surface wetting, we can effectively harvest energy from wild wind.

3.3 TENG as self-powered sensors

TENG is a device that converts a mechanical triggering into an electric output signal (voltage and current), which means that it can be used to direct sensing a dynamic mechanical action without applying a power unit to the device. This is a self-powering sensor. We have applied TENG for a range of sensing such as finger touching, [42, 43, 44] vibration detection,[26] tracking of moving object (location, velocity and acceleration),[45, 46, 47] fine displacement in MEMS,[48] rotation sensor [49] and even chemical sensor.[50]

4. Problems to be discussed

Since its first demonstration in 2012,3 TENG has experienced a very rapid development both in fundamental understanding and technological improvements. As toward the future applications, there are a number of issues and problems need to be addressed, as listed in follows.

4.1 Fundamental mechanism of contact-electrification.

Although triboelectrification is a phenomenon known to each and every one, its basic mechanism of why two materials become charged once in physical contact remain to be extensively investigated. It has been debated that the charging are due to electron transfer as a result in energy level misalignment, ion transfer and/or materials species transfer. We have used AFM to study the charge density that a surface can be charged to, how long does it take for the charges to dissipate on an insulator surface, which can be hours, and how fast the charge diffuse on the surface.[51] We also used a conductive AFM tip to manipulate the sign of charges to be delivered to a surface by applying a preset bias, so that the surface charge can be positive, null or negative.[52] More detailed measurements have to be made in order to fully understand the electrostatic charging on surfaces.

4.2 Quantitative understanding the surface charge density.

A key factor that dictates the performance of the TENG is the surface charge density, which can be taken as a standard to characterize the matrix of performance of a material for TENG. Quantitative techniques have to be developed to accurately measure the surface charge density. It is unclear how the surface structures, such as roughness, dielectric properties and the presence of nanoparticles/nanowires, would affect the magnitude of the charge density. More fundamental studies are required.

4.3 Measurement matrix – a standard for calibrating the performance of a materials for TENG

We have presented four modes of TENGs. The design and operation conditions of these TENGs are vastly different and it is important to find a parameter that can be used to quantify the performance of the TENG, similar to defining the efficiency for a solar cell, and a ZT factor for thermoelectrics. The energy conversion efficiencies for each mode can be different although the materials are the same, depending on the triggering conditions and design geometry. But one common factor that determines the performance of all the TENGs is the charge density on the two surfaces, the saturation value of which may independent of the triggering configurations of the TENG. Therefore, the triboelectric charge density or the relative charge density in reference to a standard material (such as polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE)), can be taken as a measuring matrix for characterizing the performance of the material for the TENG.

4.4 Choice of materials

Although all of the materials exhibit triboelectricity, finding the right paired materials that can give the maximum output. Although there is a guidance of triboelectric series, it is a qualitative indication about the gaining or losing electron capability of a material, but it lacks a quantitative standard of calibration. Choices of materials, surface structure configurations and patterning, surface functionalization and more need to be studied. By introducing nanomaterials and possibly nanocomposites, we can optimize the mechanical, dielectric and surface properties of a materials for receiving the maximum power output.

4.5 Power management

A typical character of the TENG is high output voltage but low output current. But a general electronics requires a regulated power of a few volts. Approaches have to be developed to lower the output voltage without sacrificing the output power. This can be done by designing TENGs with smaller size or thickness, but the entire package can be integrating many units for increasing the output current. As for rotation based TENGs with a periodic AC output, a transformer can be applied to lower the voltage, but finding a right match is required to maximize the efficiency of power transfer.

4.6 Durability and stability

Since the triboelectrification is a result of two materials in physical contact, especially in contact-sliding mode, the durability and stability of the TENGs require to be continuously improved. We have tested a disc based rotation TENG for 10 million cycles in contact mode [32], no degradation in output was observed. This may be good for low frequency applications. For practical application at high frequency, finding and using materials with a high durability is important.

4.7 Packaging

Since the TENG is based on surface charging effect, and its performance is largely affected by the environment such as humidity and surface adsorption layers. Packaging materials and technologies are required to protect the device from contamination or liquid infiltration but without scarifying too much of the efficiency and output power. This is because that TENG is a device that converts mechanical energy into electricity, preserving its flexibility and elasticity is important for improving the energy conversion efficiency. Such packaging is different from conventional packaging because of the presence of mechanical triggering.

4.8 Energy storage

Energy harvesting from the environment is subject to the variation of the environment, which is time dependent, instable and sometime unpredictable, but the power required to drive electronics is regulated

with a fixed input voltage and power. It is important to store the generated energy in a battery or capacitor, so that it can be used to power a device in a regulated manner. Between the power generation unit and a storage unit, a power management circuit is required to maximize the efficiency of power storage; the integration of the three forms a self-charging power pack.[53]

4.9 Hybridized cell for harvesting all types of energies

The working environment of a sensor can vary and the energy available in its working environment can also vary, such as solar, thermal and mechanical. It is important to harvest all types of energy that are available for the sensor. Hybrid cells that simultaneously or individually harvesting solar, thermal and/or mechanical energy have been developed,[54, 55, 56, 57] but the performance and coupling among them are indispensable, because the output characteristics of each type of energy harvester are drastically different, such as solar is a constant DC signal, while TENG is a pulsed AC signal.

4.10 Hybridization with traditional electromagnetic induction generator

Electromagnetic induction was first discovered by Faraday in 1831, which later becomes the dominant mechanism used to convert mechanical energy into electricity. The generator requires a strong magnet, a metal coin and a rotator. The electromagnetic generator (EMG) usually is heavy, fairly costly and large volume. EMG's output characteristic is low voltage but high output current. In contrast, TENG uses organic materials so that it is light, smaller and cost-effective. The output characteristic of TENG is high voltage but low current. The disadvantage of the TENG is likely lower durability. The power performances of the two approaches are quite compatible and each has its own unique advantages, but the two can be used complementary according to the applications.[58, 59]

5. Perspectives

The discovery of triboelectric nanogenerator (TENG) is a major milestone in the field of converting mechanical energy into electricity for building self-powered systems. It offers a completely new paradigm for effectively harvesting mechanical energy using organic and in organic materials. An energy conversion efficiency of 50% and total energy conversion efficiency of 85% have been demonstrated, and the output power density of 1200 W/m^2 has been realized. The TENG can not only serve as a micro-scale power source for mobile and portable electronics, but also it has the potential to harvest water energy from ocean and wind, opening a new field of *blue energy*, which is a new chapter beyond green energy. Figure 4 shows a proposed technology development road map for nanogenerators and its commercial applications. Furthermore, TENG can serve as a self-powered sensor for sensing mechanical triggering, pressure, muscle stretching and more, which may become commercially available sooner than energy harvesters.

The discovery of TENG opens a new field for materials scientists and chemists for using organic nanogenerator for converting mechanical energy at a high efficiency, so called organic nanogenerator, which is a disruptive technology for energy. We anticipate much more enhancement of the output power density will be demonstrated in the next few years. We anticipate a worldwide study of TENG in the next few years, and soon some industrial products and applications will be demonstrated.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1. The four fundamental modes of triboelectric nanogenerators: (a) vertical contact-separation mode; (b) in-plane contact-sliding mode; (c) single-electrode mode; and (d) freestanding triboelectric-layer mode.

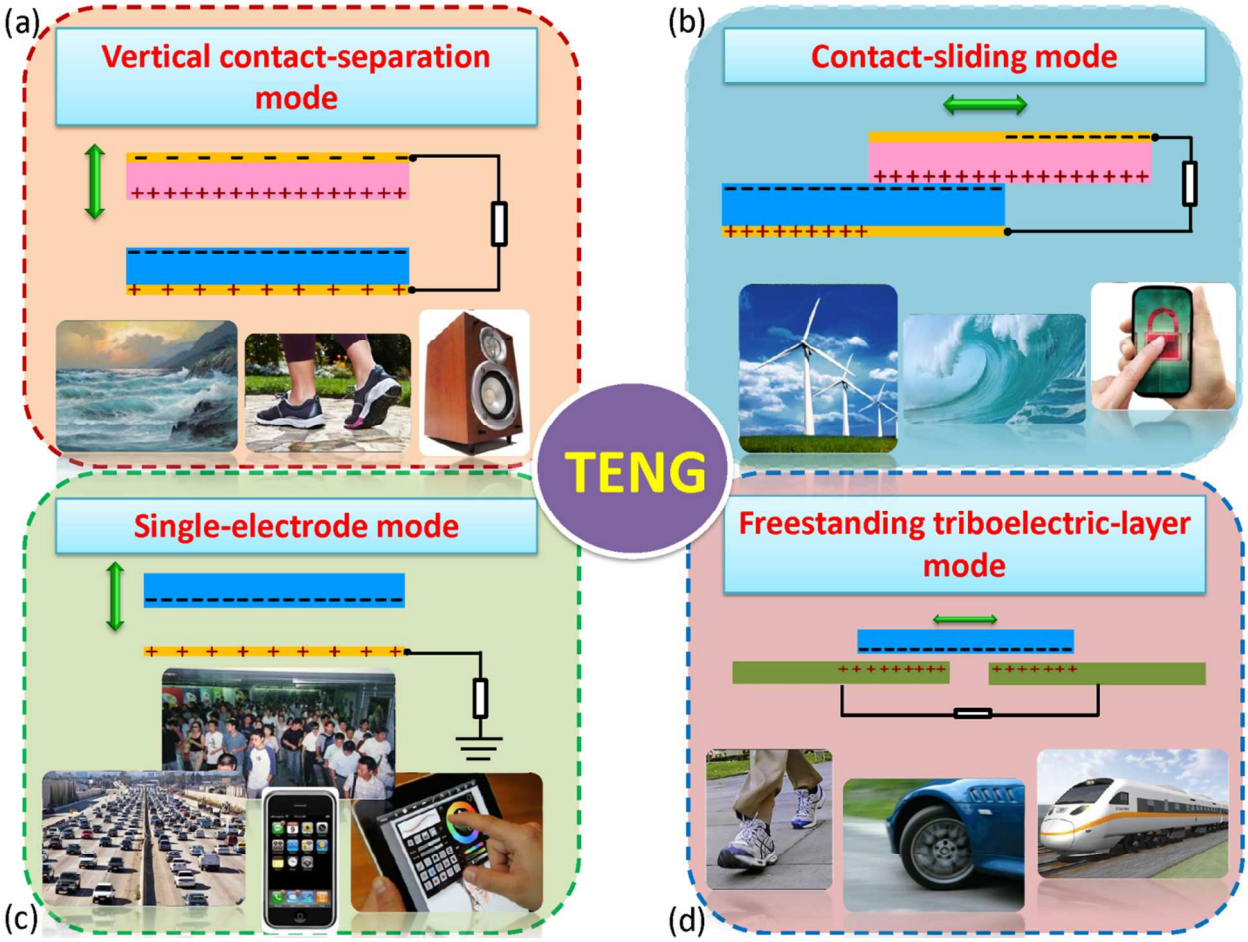


Fig. 2. Typical photographs of some triboelectric nanogenerators fabricated for harvesting (a) finger tapping energy; (b) air-flow/wind energy; (c) relative in-plane sliding energy; (d) enclosed cage for harvesting oscillating/disturbing energy in water or mechanical vibration; (e) fabric for harvesting body motion energy; (f) transparent TENG for harvesting energy in touch pad; (g) foot/hand pressing energy; (h) water impact energy; (i) cylindrical rotation energy; (j) shoe insole for walking energy; (k) flexible grating structure for harvesting sliding energy; and (l) disc shape rotation energy.

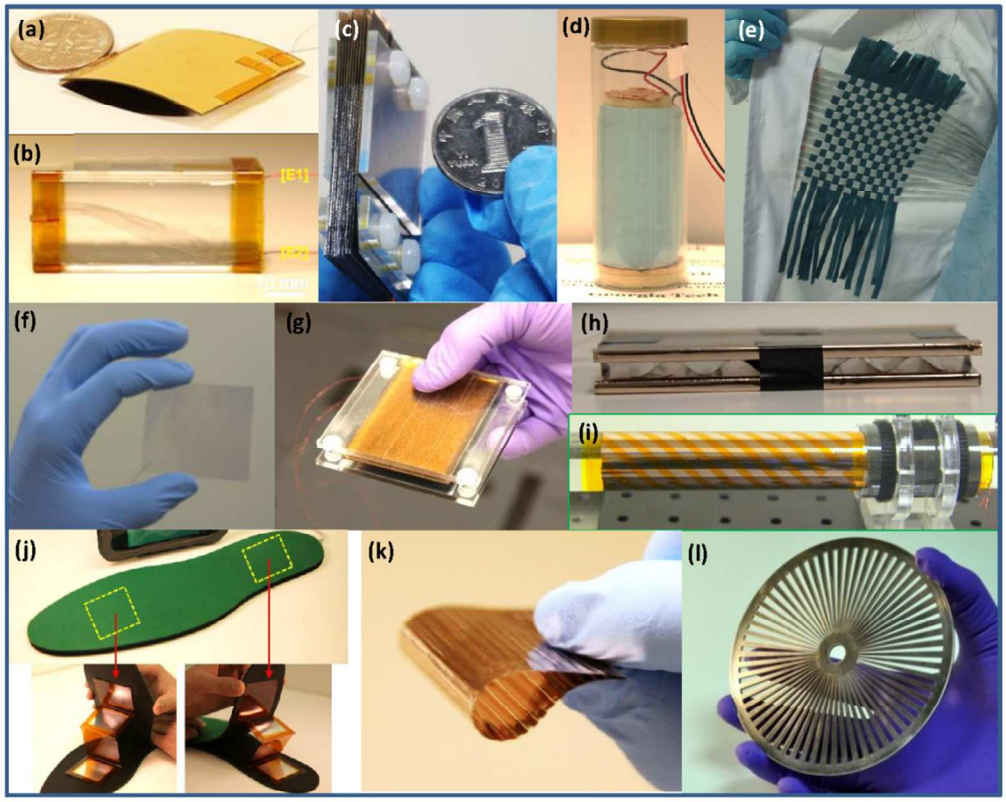


Fig. 3. A proposed idea for harvesting water energy from ocean using an integrated assembly of small unit TENGs in a 3D network.

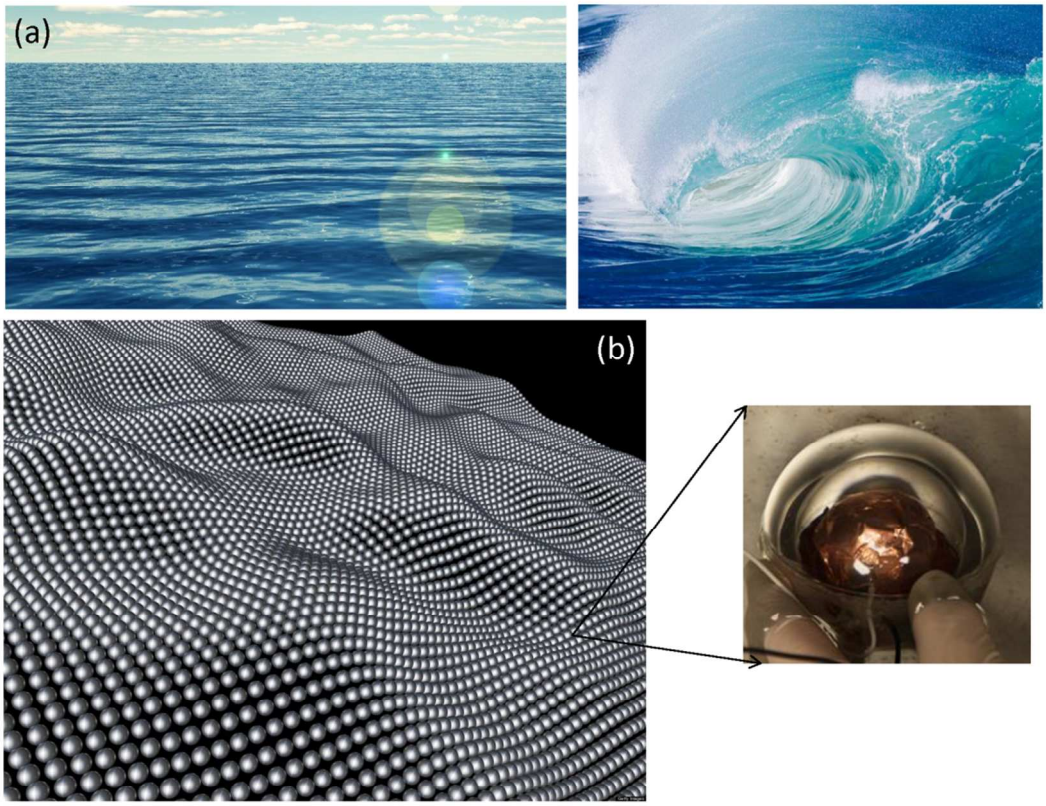
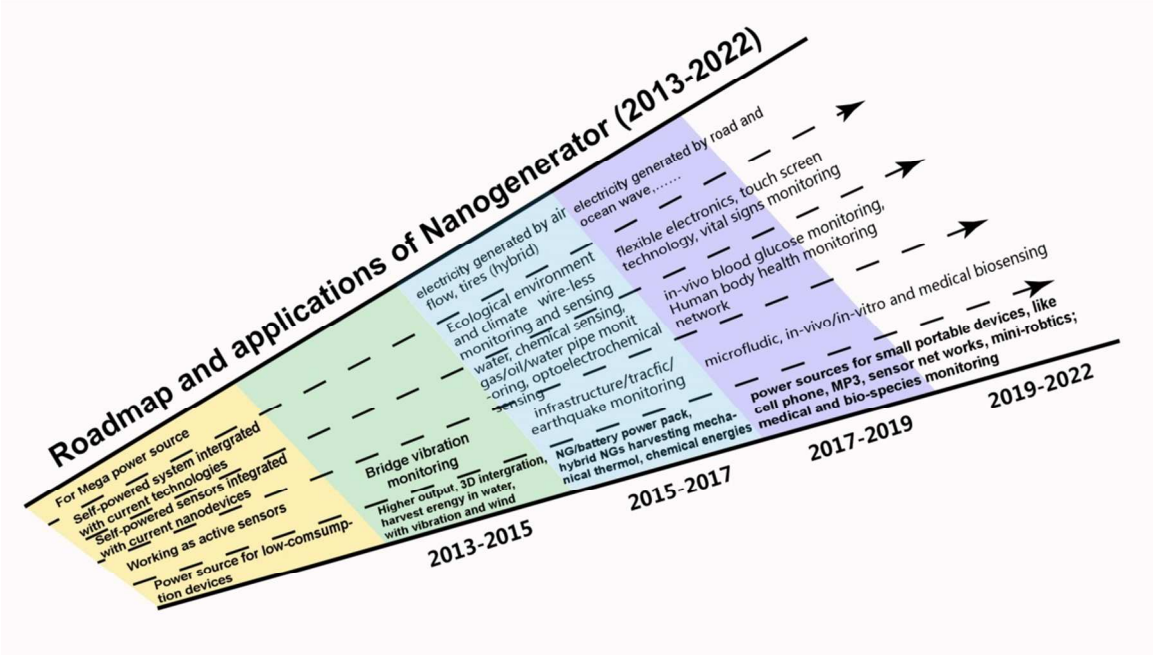


Fig. 4. Proposed technology roadmap for nanogenerators (2012).



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