Ultra Low Power Consumption for Self-Oscillating Nanoelectromechanical Systems Constructed by Contacting Two Nanowires

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ABSTRACT: We report here the observation of a new self-oscillation mechanism in nanoelectromechanical systems (NEMS). A highly resistive nanowire was positioned to form a point-contact at a chosen vibration node of a silicon carbide nanowire resonator. Spontaneous and robust mechanical oscillations arise when a sufficient DC voltage is applied between the two nanowires. An original model predicting the threshold voltage is used to estimate the piezoresistivity of the point-contact in agreement with the observations. The measured input power is in the pW-range which is the lowest reported value for such systems. The simplicity of the contacting procedure and the low power consumption open a new route for integrable and low-loss self-excited NEMS devices.

KEYWORDS: NEMS, self-oscillation, low power, doubly clamped, nanowire, nanoscale contact

Nanoelectromechanical systems (NEMS) have recently motivated much research in both fundamental physics and nanotechnology. For the former one can cite measuring mechanical ground state quantum oscillations1–3 and single electron resonance tuning4,5 and for the latter, mass sensors with single atom resolution6 and radio receptors based on individual nanotube resonators.7–17 A well-established practical difficulty for NEMS applications is to be able to systematically find the resonance frequencies of such high Q-factor nanoscale resonators which vary somewhat arbitrarily due to fabrication tolerances and device drifts. A relevant option is to use NEMS with a self-oscillation ability for which only a DC energy supply is necessary for the spontaneous driving of the mechanical resonances. Furthermore, this approach is particularly interesting from the point of view of power saving when the input power is small and ultimately equal to the intrinsic mechanical losses of the resonators.

One class of self-oscillating NEMS has been developed using “external” positive feedback obtained from electrical amplifier loops10,11 and microwave12 or optical13–17 cavity fields. A major drawback is the large power consumption required to supply the external feedback, while often only a single or a few nanoscale objects are spontaneously driven. A second promising class of self-oscillating NEMS uses “internal” positive feedback where the essential physical elements are all at the nanoscale, in close proximity to the resonator. The first such NEMS consisted of self-oscillating SiC nanowires in a field-emission configuration.18 Carbon nanotubes (CNTs) can also be used as field-emitters for millimeter-sized mechanical self-oscillators19 or in a configuration where field-emitting nanotubes are the self-oscillating mechanical resonators.20 Self-oscillation during charge shuttling was first observed with molecules21 and then with nanopillars.22 Some specific transistors with either doped Si channels in depletion23 or CNT channels functioning in the Coulomb blockade regime4 have also shown mechanical self-oscillations. Other self-oscillation mechanisms are found with back-action mediated by thermal coupling24 or carrier excitation.25

In this Letter, we present a new internal feedback mechanism that leads to self-oscillations, demonstrated with an original device composed of two contacted nanowires. There are two particularly original aspects. First, the device exploits a flexible contact at the nodes of the second or higher order vibration modes, a strategy that we have not seen in any previous NEMS. As a consequence the fundamental vibration mode is not dominant in the dynamics as is usual. Second, and more exceptionally, the contact makes use of nanoscale stiction effects,26 which are generally frequent and usually unwanted side effects during device fabrication or manipulation. Here the stiction between the nanowires forms a point-contact structure27 whose electromechanical properties are the key new element of this self-oscillation mechanism. The experimental observations are supported by an electromechanical model where the self-oscillation originates from the properties of the point-contact. The threshold voltage is used to determine a dynamical value for the piezoresistivity due to the mechanical oscillation of the point-contact. Besides the simplicity of the
contacting technique, our observations show the existence of the self-oscillation regime for nW to pW of input power. This last value is promising as it is 2 orders of magnitude lower than previously reported values for self-oscillating NEMS devices. A table comparing the literature values of the efficiency of self-oscillation mechanisms is included. Our mechanism is found to have the highest value proving the interest for point-contact self-oscillating devices.

Two silicon carbide (SiC) nanowires chosen for their large aspect ratio were mounted on electrochemically sharpened tungsten tips and introduced into an ultra high vacuum (UHV) chamber dedicated to nanomechanical measurements. The nanowires were produced by a versatile vapor−solid process.28 The two tungsten support tips were fixed on Attocube piezo motors for relative XYZ positioning of the nanowires (see Figure 1b). The observation of the nanowire positions was made using a scanning electron microscope (SEM) integrated in the UHV chamber. The longer nanowire was the resonator ($L_l = 200 \mu m$, diameter 250 nm), while the shorter one served as a quasi immobile contact ($L_s = 57 \mu m$, diameter 350 nm). The two nanowires were approximately parallel to the SEM observation plane (XY), and the long resonator was displaced along the Z-axis to place both nanowires simultaneously in the SEM focus plane. The XY displacements could be used to touch the apex of the long nanowire to either the tungsten support of the short nanowire or the short nanowire itself. The resistances are measured in this configuration with typical values $R_l = 1 \, \Omega$ for the long nanowire and $R_s = 1 \, T \Omega$ for the short nanowire.

The position of the second mode’s vibration node was determined using electrostatic driving before the sticking procedure (see Supporting Information, Figure S1). The short nanowire was then contacted close to the node position (79% of the long nanowire length). The procedure for the contacting and the sticking of the nanowires is simple. The short nanowire was first moved close to the long nanowire. A DC voltage ($\sim 20 \, V$) was then applied between the two nanowires inducing an electrostatic attractive force between them. Once the nanowires touched, the adhesion forces at the contact were strong enough to maintain a rigid structure even when the bias voltage was reduced to zero. Immediately after the sticking, an increasing DC voltage was applied between the two nanowires, and the structure jumped spontaneously into mechanical self-oscillations at a specific threshold value $V_{th}$ (Figure 1a). Furthermore, when the DC voltage applied to the oscillating system was swept downward, the oscillations disappeared abruptly at a lower extinction voltage, $V_e < V_{th}$. $V_{th}$ and $V_e$ delimit a rather large hysteresis cycle. Note that no AC driving was applied. A particularity of the oscillations was that the long nanowire underwent large amplitude vibrations, while the movement of the short one was usually indiscernible. The DC current was measured with a series ammeter with pA resolution. During a voltage sweep, the appearance (disappearance) of the oscillations was concomitant with a sudden increase (decrease) in the current (Figure 1c). This means that the average conductivity of the structure increased when it oscillated.

The spontaneous oscillation frequency is measured by a time-resolved position detection technique in which the SEM electron beam is focalized on the long resonator near its base.29 During spontaneous oscillations the long resonator moves periodically in and out of the focused electron beam, thus creating a periodic secondary electron current that is measured by a scintillator. As the resonator intercepts the beam twice during one oscillation cycle, the frequency measured from the current signal is twice the oscillation frequency. During spontaneous oscillation, the number of cycles as a function of

![Figure 1.](image)
time is extracted from the acquired signal (see Supporting Information, Figure S3). The number of cycles increased almost linearly with time (see the main plot in Figure 2) giving a self-oscillation frequency of 36436 ± 5 Hz (i.e., Hz), very close to the eigenfrequency for the second mode of the free resonator (38 kHz).

Several experimental evidence of the self-oscillation are to be noticed. First, the existence of a DC threshold voltage suggests that the driving power of the vibration comes from the DC electrical source. Second, the stability of the frequency shown in Figure S2 suggests that the driving power of the vibration comes from the DC voltage and thus a reproducible meaning that the beam had no or little influence on the resonator movement.

We propose that the self-oscillation regime originates from the internal environment of the contacted nanowires under a DC bias voltage where the nanoscale electromechanical properties of the point-contact play a crucial role. A simplified model is proposed for the description of the self-oscillation mechanism where only one mechanical degree of freedom is considered. The contact is assumed to be precisely at the vibration node which means that only the long resonator is likely to oscillate. Thus, the equation of motion for the vibration mode is:

$$m\ddot{x} + \Gamma \dot{x} + k x = \mathcal{F}_e(V_{DC}, x, \dot{x})$$

where $x$ is the amplitude at the apex of the long resonator, $m$ is the effective mass of the vibration mode, $\Gamma$ the intrinsic damping constant, and $\mathcal{F}_e(V_{DC}, x, \dot{x})$ the electrostatic forcing. This forcing term comes from the electrostatic interaction between the two nanowires as the DC voltage introduces electrical charges on each nanowire. The dependencies in $x$ and $\dot{x}$ in $\mathcal{F}_e$ comes from the fact that the vibration of the long nanowire affects the values for the contact resistance and the coupling capacitance of the two nanowires thus affecting the charge distribution. Using a Taylor expansion for $\mathcal{F}_e(V_{DC}, x, \dot{x})$, the equation of motion (eq 1) can be written as

$$m\ddot{x} + \Gamma \dot{x} + k x = 0$$

where the effective spring coefficient $k_e = k + \partial \mathcal{F}_e / \partial x$ and the effective damping coefficient $\Gamma_e = \Gamma + \partial \mathcal{F}_e / \partial \dot{x}$ are introduced because of the electromechanical coupling. $\mathcal{F}_e$ is given in the Supporting Information as a function of the physical parameters of the nanowires. The self-oscillation threshold voltage $V_{th}$ is obtained when the effective damping $\Gamma_e$ becomes zero:

$$\Gamma_e = \Gamma + \frac{R_tC'/8 + R'/2R_t \pi}{1 + \omega_0^2 \tau^2} C V_{th}^2 = 0$$

where $R_t$ is the total resistance of the contacted nanowires, $C$ the capacitance between them and $\tau = R_tC$ (see Supporting Information, Figure S5). The prime denotes a derivative with respect to $x$. The angular frequency $\omega_0 = (k/m)^{1/2}$ of the mechanical mode is considered because the frequency shift due to the electromechanical coupling is small $\delta \omega / \omega_0 = (\partial \mathcal{F}_e / \partial x)/2k = 0.02\%$.

The instability threshold relation 3 is used to determine an experimental value for $R'$ which can be considered as a piezoresistive coefficient associated to the mechanical vibration. The experimental values are $R_l = 1$ TΩ, $\omega_0 = 2\pi \times 38500$ rad·s$^{-1}$, $Q = 5000$, the later two being measured with forced oscillations without contact and $V_{DC} = 0$ V. The effective mass $m = 5 \times 10^{-15}$ kg is calculated from the long resonator density, length, and radius. The noncontacted configuration is also used to measure typical values for the long nanowire capacitance ($C = 1$ pF) and its first derivative ($C' = 1$ pF·m$^{-1}$) for an experimental threshold voltage $V_{th} = 20$ V, the self-oscillation condition gives $R' = -1.2 \times 10^{16}$ Ω·m$^{-1}$. For an experimental threshold voltage $V_{DC} = 20$ V, the self-oscillation condition gives $R' = -1.2 \times 10^{16}$ Ω·m$^{-1}$. This value is in good agreement with the electrical measurement from Figure 1c where the order of magnitude for the resistance variation due to the mechanical vibration corresponds to $\Delta R_{DC} / \Delta x = -2.4 \times 10^{16}$ Ω·m$^{-1}$. This value is calculated considering that the self-oscillation threshold is associated with a current jump $\Delta I$ giving a resistance variation of $\Delta R_{DC} = -V_{DC} \Delta I / I_{DC} = -1.2 \times 10^{11}$ Ω for a typical vibration amplitude $\Delta x = 5 \mu$m.

In-depth studies outside the scope of this article would be necessary to understand the resistance variation at a microscopic level. There are two difficulties in comparing with published studies on point-contacts. First our surfaces are not characterized. Second, and more specifically, here the contact is
varied by torques between the nanowires, while studies that combine force and electrical measurements are generally for vertical forces between surfaces.31

The self-oscillation is observed only when a vibration node of the long resonator is close to or at the position of the contact because then the short nanowire does not need to move, which would add strong supplementary rigidity and block the vibrations. As well, the short nanowire vibration would involve a supplementary damping partly due to ohmic losses through the large resistance of the short nanowire.29 The node at the contact also insures a maximal pivoting movement of the point-contact while a collective displacement of the nanowires would have no effect on the point-contact deformation.

The necessity to contact at a vibration node might appear to be a serious experimental difficulty. An important property of our method is the possibility to adjust the vibration node position with an induced mechanical longitudinal tension \( T \) due to the displacement in the \( X \) direction of the short nanowire. This is particularly interesting when the contact is not precisely at 79% of the long resonator length corresponding to the vibration node without mechanical tension (\( T = 0 \)). A modeling of the mechanical coupling for the contacted nanowires is used to define the contact positions and mechanical tensions for which a vibration node is at the contact position (see Supporting Information). The results are shown for the second mode (solid line) and the third mode (dashed line) in Figure 3. The node of the second mode can be made to correspond to any contact position from 78% to 100% of the long resonator length, providing that the appropriate mechanical tension is applied. The experimental data points correspond to self-oscillation observations using an image analysis for the determination of the contacting position and the mechanical tension value. The mechanical tension \( T \) induced in the long resonator is calculated from the static deflection \( \delta_r \) and the spring coefficient \( k \) of the short nanowire.

The lowest threshold voltage was measured in the buckling region discussed in Figure 3 and its caption to be \( V_{\text{DC}} = 2 \text{ V} \) with \( I_{\text{DC}} = 0.5 \text{ pA} \), meaning that the input power of the DC source was \( P_{\text{in}} = 1 \text{ pW} \). This value is remarkably low, particularly for a first demonstration of the phenomena and is the lowest reported value leading to a self-oscillating NEMS (see Figure 4, horizontal axis). As expected, the input power is larger for self-oscillating NEMS with macroscopic external coupling such as amplifiers (Feng, Villanueva, Ramos) or optical (Metzger, Barton) and microwave (Teufel) cavities for which the input power is typically around 1 \( \mu \text{W} \) to 1 mW. For nanoscale feedback self-oscillators, solid state devices also require large input power because of large currents drawn through their low resistances (Grogg, Steeneken), while for optical carrier excitation appreciable laser beam power is used (Okamoto). The field-emitting self-oscillators (Ayari, Weldon) have much lower current but suffer from large extraction voltages. At first sight a low input power can be expected for ideal charge shuttle self-oscillators because just below the threshold there are no current and no dissipative losses. However the only experimentally operating device (Kim) showed additional losses due to parasitic field-emission.

The input power is compared to the mechanical power losses as a more relevant way to rate the efficiency of the different self-oscillation mechanisms (Figure 4, vertical axis). In general any self-oscillation mechanism acting on a passive resonator can be seen as an active compensation of the intrinsic mechanical losses. Considering these mechanical losses as inevitable, the efficiency \( \eta \) of the self-oscillation mechanism is introduced as the ratio between the intrinsic mechanical power losses during a cycle and the input power, \( \eta = P_{\text{diss}}/P_{\text{in}} \). For an optimal self-oscillation mechanism (\( \eta = 1 \)), the input power exactly equals the mechanical losses meaning that the minimal power is injected to overcome the intrinsic dissipation. During self-oscillation for a quasi-harmonic vibration, the intrinsic

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**Figure 3.** 2D map where the \( x \)-axis is the position of the contact on the long resonator (as a ratio of the length) and the \( y \)-axis is the mechanical longitudinal tension \( T \) induced in the long resonator by the lateral displacement of the short nanowire. When the contact is made near the end of the long resonator, a strong negative tension leads to a buckling instability (gray area). The continuous and dashed lines are numerical computations corresponding to contacting positions and mechanical tensions for which a mechanical vibration node matched the contacting position. The experimental data points represent six observed self-oscillating states. For each point, the contact position on the long resonator and the deflection of the short nanowire \( \delta_r \) are determined by image analysis. The mechanical tension is taken from the relation \( T = k \delta_r \), where \( k = 6.3 \text{ mN} \cdot \text{m}^{-1} \) is the spring coefficient for the short nanowire deflection.

**Figure 4.** Efficiency of self-oscillation mechanisms, \( \eta = P_{\text{diss}}/P_{\text{in}} \) as a function of the input power \( P_{\text{in}} \). \( P_{\text{diss}} \) is the power dissipation by the intrinsic mechanical losses. The values for the expression of \( P_{\text{diss}} \) and \( P_{\text{in}} \) are displayed in Table 1. The dashed line corresponds to an efficiency 1 (0 in logarithmic axis) for which all of the driving power would compensate the mechanical losses.
During self-oscillation. External back-action, nanoscale feedback. The RMS velocity for a quasi harmonic oscillation where the large piezoresistance is the origin of the self-oscillation mechanism.

Because the point-contacts have large piezoresistivity which is smaller than the power consumption of any other self-oscillating NEMS devices. The self-oscillation frequency is measured with the intrinsic damping (see Table 1). For the contacted nanowires, the self-oscillation frequency is measured with the static mechanical stress, the self-oscillation was avoided the self-oscillation regime. For an amplitude buckling instability lowers the stiffness of the resonator. The mechanical power losses are given by

\[ P_{\text{diss}} = \Gamma \langle \dot{x} \rangle^2 \]

where \( \langle \dot{x} \rangle \) is the root-mean-square velocity for vibration cycle during self-oscillation. External back-action, nanoscale feedback.

Table 1. Power Dissipation by the Intrinsic Mechanical Losses \( (P_{\text{diss}}) \) and Input Power \( (P_{\text{in}}) \) for Reported MEMS/NEMS Self-Oscillators\(^a\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>( f )</th>
<th>( Q )</th>
<th>( m ) (kg)</th>
<th>( A )</th>
<th>( P_{\text{in}} )</th>
<th>( P_{\text{diss}} )</th>
<th>ref.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17.4 kHz</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>( 5 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>3 ( \mu )</td>
<td>1 ( \mu W )</td>
<td>13 ( \mu W )</td>
<td>this work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>428 MHz</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>( 5.8 \times 10^{-17} )</td>
<td>1 nm</td>
<td>10 ( mW )</td>
<td>225 ( pW )</td>
<td>Feng(^{10})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143 MHz</td>
<td>1220</td>
<td>( 1.3 \times 10^{-14} )</td>
<td>10 ( \mu )</td>
<td>1 ( mW )</td>
<td>396 ( pW )</td>
<td>Villanueva(^{11})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 MHz</td>
<td>300000</td>
<td>( 6.2 \times 10^{-15} )</td>
<td>100 ( \mu )</td>
<td>10 ( nW )</td>
<td>87 ( fW )</td>
<td>Teufel(^{12})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3 kHz</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>( 3.8 \times 10^{-12} )</td>
<td>1 ( \mu )</td>
<td>130 ( \mu W )</td>
<td>92 ( fW )</td>
<td>Metger (1)(^{13})</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.7 kHz</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td>( 3.3 \times 10^{-12} )</td>
<td>35 ( \mu )</td>
<td>9 ( \mu W )</td>
<td>0.18 ( fW )</td>
<td>Metger (2)(^{15})</td>
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<td>5 MHz</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>( 1 \times 10^{-16} )</td>
<td>10 ( \mu )</td>
<td>2.6 ( mW )</td>
<td>310 ( fW )</td>
<td>Barton(^{16})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.4 kHz</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>( 5.3 \times 10^{-11} )</td>
<td>2 ( \mu )</td>
<td>5 ( mW )</td>
<td>640 ( fW )</td>
<td>Ramos(^{17})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 kHz</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>( 1.2 \times 10^{-13} )</td>
<td>17 ( \mu )</td>
<td>14 ( mW )</td>
<td>28 ( fW )</td>
<td>Ayari(^{18})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 MHz</td>
<td>1260</td>
<td>( 5 \times 10^{-19} )</td>
<td>1 ( \mu )</td>
<td>100 ( \mu W )</td>
<td>3.2 ( fW )</td>
<td>Weldon(^{20})</td>
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<td>10.5 MHz</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>( 4.1 \times 10^{-12} )</td>
<td>30 ( \mu )</td>
<td>80 ( pW )</td>
<td>110 ( fW )</td>
<td>Kim(^{22})</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.6 MHz</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>( 3.1 \times 10^{-13} )</td>
<td>60 ( \mu )</td>
<td>70 ( \mu W )</td>
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<td>Grogg(^{23})</td>
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<td>1.26 MHz</td>
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<td>( 4.1 \times 10^{-12} )</td>
<td>100 ( \mu )</td>
<td>1.1 ( mW )</td>
<td>1 ( nW )</td>
<td>Steeneken(^{24})</td>
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<tr>
<td>239 kHz</td>
<td>6500</td>
<td>( 3.5 \times 10^{-12} )</td>
<td>2 ( \mu )</td>
<td>12 ( \mu W )</td>
<td>37 ( pW )</td>
<td>Okamoto(^{25})</td>
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</table>

The power dissipated by the mechanical motion is calculated for each device using \( P_{\text{diss}} = \Gamma \langle \dot{x} \rangle^2 \), with the damping coefficient \( \Gamma = 2\eta m f / Q \) and the RMS velocity for a quasi harmonic oscillation \( \langle \dot{x} \rangle_{\text{rms}} = 2\pi\eta A / \sqrt{2} (f: \text{oscillator frequency}, Q: \text{quality factor}, m: \text{effective mass}, A: \text{typical amplitude during self-oscillation}). \)

ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

Mechanical free modes, \( I-V \) measurements, position detection and phase extraction, frequency of the self-oscillation as a function of DC applied voltage, electromechanical model, frequency shift from the electromechanical coupling, and mechanical coupling. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at http://pubs.acs.org.

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Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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