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Aluminum oxide free-standing thin films to enable nitrogen edge soft x-ray scattering

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Abstract

Resonant soft x-ray scattering (RSoXS) leverages chemical specificity to characterize thin films but is limited near the nitrogen edge. The challenge is that commercially available x-ray transparent substrates are composed of Si_3N_4 and thereby absorb incident x-rays and generate incoherent fluorescence. To overcome this challenge, we designed and fabricated Al_2O_3 free-standing films for use as RSoXS windows. Al_2O_3 films offer higher x-ray transmittance and minimal fluorescence near the nitrogen edge. As an example, Al_2O_3 windows allow for nitrogen RSoXS of conjugated block copolymer thin films that reveal domain spacings, which are not apparent with commercially available Si_3N_4 substrates.

Resonant soft x-ray scattering (RSoXS) is a relatively new technique that can provide structural information about organic thin films with chemical sensitivity. Pioneering work demonstrated that transmission soft x-ray scattering experiments can reveal the 20 to 30 nm domain spacing in microphase-separated polystyrene-*b*-polyisoprene thin films by working at resonance with the $1s \rightarrow \pi^*(\text{C}=\text{C})$ transition.^[1] Further work has transformed our understanding of the microstructure in polymer/fullerene mixtures^[2–5] and conjugated block copolymers (BCPs) used in photovoltaics^[6] by identifying length scales for phase or microphase separation, and has resulted in new structural models for biomolecules in solution, such as casein micelles^[7,8] and bovine serum albumin.^[9] Most RSoXS data to date are generated at the carbon edge,^[10] with a few exceptions of studies that include the oxygen^[11,12] and calcium edges.^[7,13]

Despite the opportunity to examine the distribution of nitrogen (N) in organic and biological compounds, very few studies have employed RSoXS at the N edge.^[14] The challenge lies in the x-ray transparent support, which is 50–100 nm thick Si_3N_4 that produces a significant RSoXS background at energies near the N edge. These Si_3N_4 supports are formed through a low-pressure chemical vapor deposition (LPCVD) process and have Young's moduli between 140 and 290 GPa^[15] with a fracture toughness of about 6 MPa·m^{0.5}.^[16] These mechanical properties allow fabricated free-standing Si_3N_4 windows with a 1 mm × 1 mm opening to have a thickness of approximately

50 nm and enable the construction of liquid sample cells that can withstand the high vacuum in the RSoXS sample chamber.^[7,9] Nevertheless, fluorescence at the N edge when using Si_3N_4 supports adds a significant incoherent background and confounds RSoXS studies.

As an alternative to Si_3N_4 , we designed and fabricated Al_2O_3 windows for RSoXS experiments. Atomic layer deposition (ALD) leads to Al_2O_3 films with Young's moduli near 200 GPa^[17] and a fracture toughness of about 2 MPa·m^{0.5},^[18] which is comparable with values from LPCVD Si_3N_4 films. These mechanical properties enabled the fabrication of 46 nm thick free-standing Al_2O_3 films that have higher x-ray transmittance than commercially available 50 nm thick Si_3N_4 . Using Al_2O_3 films as x-ray windows, we demonstrated RSoXS at the N K-edge for a poly(3-hexylthiophene-2,5-diyl)-*block*-poly((9,9-bis-(2-octyl) fluorene-2,7-diyl)-alt-(4,7-di(thiophene-2-yl)-21,3-benzothiadiazole)-5',5''-diyl) BCP (P3HT-*b*-PFTBT). RSoXS of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT supported on Al_2O_3 windows reveals a structural feature at the N K-edge that is not observed using Si_3N_4 supports due to the fluorescence background from Si_3N_4 .

Suitable substrates for soft x-ray scattering experiments require a x-ray transparent film and a support structure. Our approach relies on patterning Al_2O_3 films that are deposited on silicon wafers as shown in Fig. 1. The RSoXS substrate design contains 5 mm × 5 mm squares as the silicon frame with a 1.7 mm-diameter circle in the center of each square as

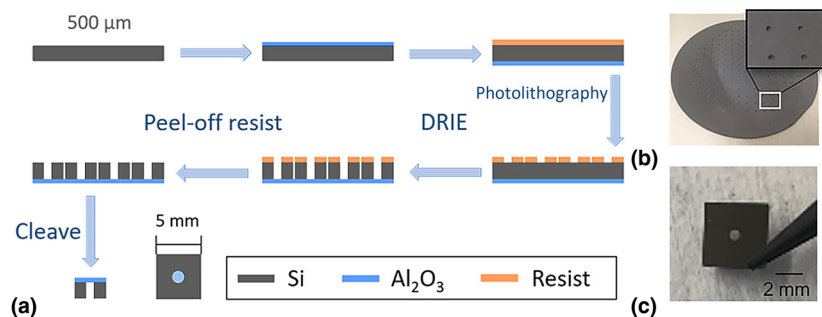


Figure 1. Fabrication of Al_2O_3 windows by atomic layer deposition and photolithography. (a) Schematic of Al_2O_3 window fabrication process. (b) A 4-inch wafer after lithography and etch. (c) An Al_2O_3 window used as a support for RSoXS experiments.

the Al_2O_3 window. Al_2O_3 films were grown on a 4-inch silicon wafer through ALD and patterns were transferred to the Al_2O_3 -coated wafer through photolithography. After photolithography, the silicon covering the circular patterned area was back etched using deep reactive-ion etching, which leaves an Al_2O_3 free-standing film with a diameter of approximately 1 mm. Following the nanofabrication process, resist was removed and the wafers were cleaved into individual Al_2O_3 windows. Spectroscopic ellipsometry revealed an Al_2O_3 window thickness of 46 nm. AFM images shown in Figure S1 of the Supplementary material reveal that the roughness of Al_2O_3 films is similar to the roughness of commercially available Si_3N_4 films. Nevertheless, shallow long depressions (trenches) are apparent in Al_2O_3 , although the origin of these features is unclear.

The x-ray transmittance and scattering of Al_2O_3 windows as compared with Si_3N_4 windows were tested using RSoXS. As shown in Fig. 2(a), the x-ray transmittance spectra indicate that the 46 nm thick Al_2O_3 windows absorb less x-rays than the 50 nm thick Si_3N_4 windows. The scattering profile from the Al_2O_3 film has no structural peaks near the carbon K-edge [Fig. 2(b)] or the nitrogen K-edge [Fig. 2(c)], as expected. Data at the onset of the nitrogen K-edge (398.2 eV) is shown in Figure S2 of the Supplementary material. Scattering from the 46 nm thick Al_2O_3 window has lower intensity at high q ($q > 0.01 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$) than scattering from the 50 nm thick Si_3N_4 window. The higher scattering intensity from Al_2O_3 at low q ($q < 0.01 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$) could arise because the scattering contrast between Al_2O_3 and vacuum is higher than the scattering contrast between Si_3N_4 and vacuum (Figure S3 of the Supplementary material), such that any surface roughness of the Al_2O_3 window contributes more strongly to scattering. Alternatively, the Al_2O_3 windows may have more residual contaminants on their surfaces left from the photolithography process, or the long shallow trenches apparent throughout the samples (Figure S1 of the Supplementary material) could contribute to scattering at low q .

A challenge presented by commercially available Si_3N_4 windows traditionally used for RSoXS studies is that they

generate a high incoherent fluorescence background. X-ray emission that follows ionization generates a q independent constant in the scattering profile. Using a simple model, the influence of fluorescence background on scattering profiles is demonstrated in Figure S4 of the Supplementary material. As the fluorescence background increases, the $I(q)q^2$ profile starts to have a more pronounced upturn in the high q region ($q > 0.02 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$) that can mask structural features of the sample. As shown in Figure S5a of the Supplementary material, Al_2O_3 has a similar scattering profile at the C K-edge and the N K-edge with no significant upturn. On the other hand, the scattering profile of Si_3N_4 becomes nearly constant above $q = 0.01 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ at the C K-edge while there is an upturn near $q = 0.02 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ at the N K-edge (Figure S5b of the Supplementary material). The upturn is attributed to fluorescence emission from N atoms in Si_3N_4 . Thus, the Al_2O_3 windows offer a clear advantage over Si_3N_4 at the N edge for RSoXS studies.

We use P3HT-*b*-PFTBT as a model system to demonstrate the utility of Al_2O_3 windows for characterizing the morphology of nitrogen-containing materials. P3HT-*b*-PFTBT is a conjugated BCP with record performance as a single-component active layer in organic solar cell devices.^[6] Previous work has demonstrated that P3HT-*b*-PFTBT microphase separates into a lamellar morphology with a domain spacing of about 20 nm that depends on the molecular weight.^[6,19,20] P3HT-*b*-PFTBT was synthesized using previously published methods.^[21] As shown in Fig. 3(a), there are two nitrogen atoms per monomer in the PFTBT block. The NEXAFS spectra of the homopolymers (P3HT and PFTBT) and the BCP (P3HT-*b*-PFTBT) are plotted in Fig. 3(b). All three polymers have strong absorption near the carbon K-edge, and the sharp peak near 285 eV corresponds to the $1s \rightarrow \pi^*$ transitions of the C=C bonds. Near the nitrogen edge (380 to 420 eV), there is no feature in the P3HT NEXAFS spectra while there are absorption features in the PFTBT and P3HT-*b*-PFTBT spectra from the nitrogen atoms of PFTBT. The absorption is less apparent in P3HT-*b*-PFTBT because the number density of nitrogen is lower than it is in PFTBT. Nevertheless, the difference in NEXAFS spectra between P3HT and PFTBT due to the

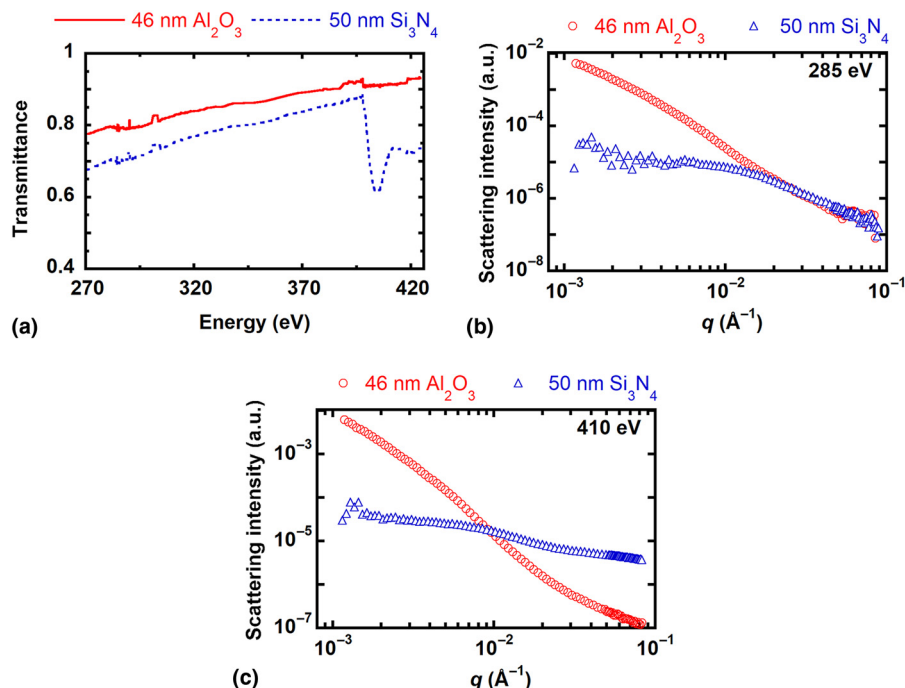


Figure 2. Absorption and scattering profiles of 46 nm thick Al₂O₃ and 50 nm thick Si₃N₄ substrates. (a) NEXAFS spectra near the carbon and nitrogen K-edges. Scattering profiles at (b) 285 eV (carbon K-edge) and (c) 410 eV (nitrogen K-edge).

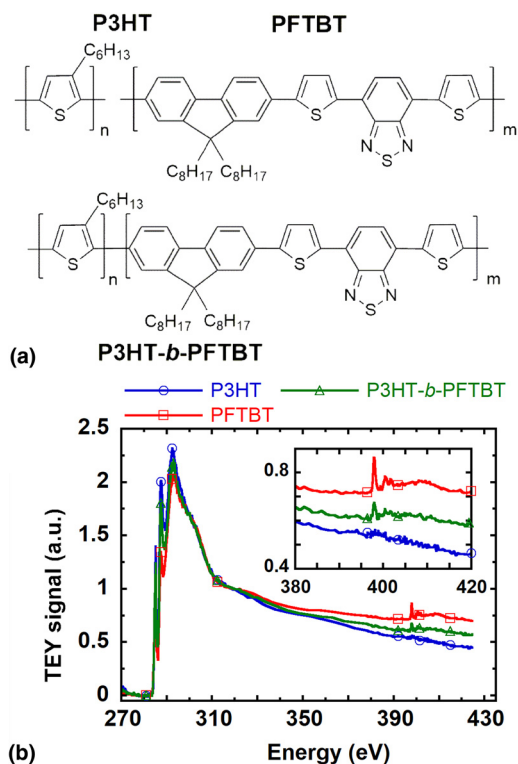


Figure 3. A model system for N RSoXS experiments. (a) Chemical structures and (b) Total Electron Yield (TEY) NEXAFS spectra of P3HT, PFTBT, and P3HT-*b*-PFTBT. The inset highlights spectra near the N edge.

lack of nitrogen in P3HT should lead to significant RSoXS contrast at the N edge.

Scattering profiles of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT thin films supported on Al₂O₃ windows and supported on commercially available Si₃N₄ windows are presented in Fig. 4. The background scattering from Al₂O₃ or Si₃N₄ windows was subtracted from the data. As shown in Fig. 4(a), the scattering profiles near the carbon K-edge (285 eV) of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT supported on Al₂O₃ or Si₃N₄ are very similar. The structural feature near $q=0.03 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ corresponds to 20 nm and indicates that P3HT and PFTBT have distinct nanoscale domains that are separated by 20 nm on average. This feature near $q=0.03 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ becomes more apparent in the Kratky plot (Iq^2 versus q) shown in Fig. 4(b), although an overall positive slope for the entire profile that is likely indicative of fluorescence from the polymer film is apparent.

Near the nitrogen edge (410 eV), there is a clear feature at approximately $q=0.02 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$ corresponding to about 30 nm in the scattering profile of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT supported on Al₂O₃ windows that is not present when measurements are taken using Si₃N₄ windows [Fig. 4(c)]. Data are also shown at the onset of the nitrogen edge (398.2 eV) in Figure S6 of the Supplementary material. When Si₃N₄ is used as a substrate, the background corrected Kratky plot has an overall positive slope with an upturn at high q starting from $q=0.03 \text{ \AA}^{-1}$, as shown in Fig. 4(d). The upturn at high q in Iq^2 is often a signature of a fluorescence (q -independent) background. Furthermore, when Si₃N₄ windows are used, the scattering

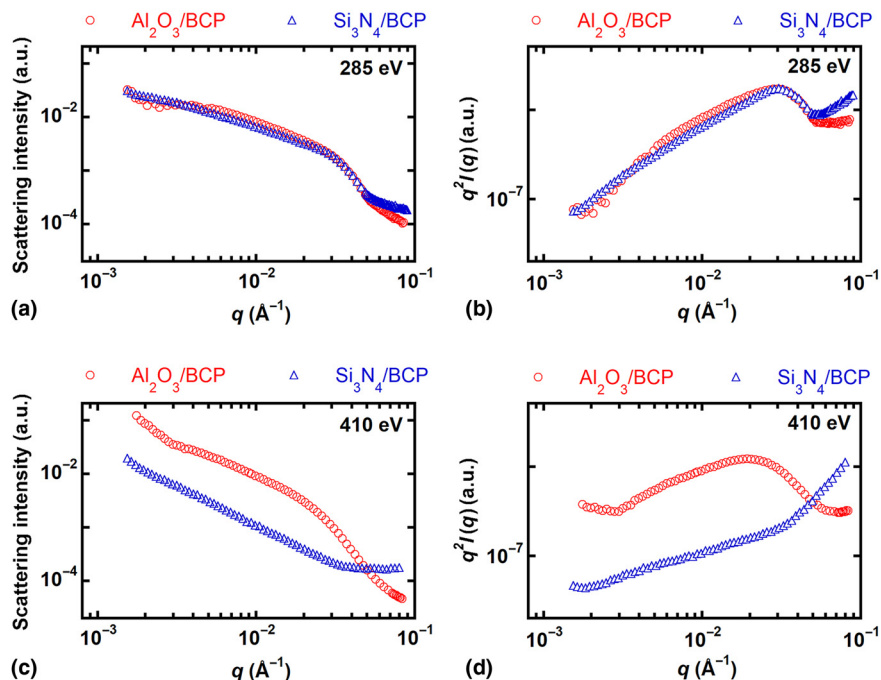


Figure 4. RSoXS profiles and Kratky plots of scattering from a P3HT-*b*-PFTBT block copolymer (BCP) supported on a 46 nm thick Al_2O_3 substrate or a 50 nm thick Si_3N_4 substrate near the (a), (b) carbon K-edge (285 eV) and the (c), (d) nitrogen K-edge (410 eV).

profile at 285 eV reveals peaks associated with the microstructure of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT [Figs. 4(a) and 4(b)], but these peaks are not apparent at the N edge [Figs. 4(c) and 4(d)]. We thus speculate that scattering is re-absorbed and emitted as incoherent fluorescence when Si_3N_4 windows are used at the N edge.

When comparing the data collected at the carbon and nitrogen edge from BCP films with Al_2O_3 supports, there is a disagreement in terms of the apparent domain spacing (at $q = 0.03$ and 0.02 \AA^{-1} , respectively). Near the nitrogen edge, the scattering contrast is between P3HT and PFTBT domains, but near the carbon edge, the scattering contrast is more complicated. Because RSoXS is sensitive to differences in chain orientation and the $1s \rightarrow \pi^*$ transition dipole moment is anisotropic, we speculate that the structure between crystalline and amorphous P3HT leads to scattering peaks at a higher q .^[22,23] Thus, the combination of C and N RSoXS reveals multiple aspects of the microstructure of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT films, including a center-to-center spacing of crystallites within P3HT domains of 20 nm and a spacing between P3HT and PFTBT domains of 30 nm.

In summary, we demonstrate that free standing 46 nm thick Al_2O_3 films enable examination of the structure of nitrogen-containing materials using RSoXS. Al_2O_3 windows reduce parasitic absorption and eliminate the fluorescence background near the nitrogen edge. As a consequence, structural features of P3HT-*b*-PFTBT are revealed near the nitrogen edge on Al_2O_3 substrates, even though such features are not apparent using commercial Si_3N_4 substrates. Fabricating x-ray transparent

substrates, such as Al_2O_3 films, will enable RSoXS studies focused on nitrogen-containing systems that include some organic semiconductors, membrane proteins, and protein-nucleic acids complexes.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1557/mrc.2018.195>.

Acknowledgments

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