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► **To cite this version:**

Paul Goulain, Anastasios Koulouklidis, Jean-Michel Manceau, Christina Daskalaki, Bruno Paulillo, et al.. Femtosecond Broadband Frequency Switch of Terahertz Three-Dimensional Meta-Atoms. *ACS photonics*, 2021, 8 (4), pp.1097-1102. 10.1021/acsp Photonics.0c01802 . hal-03244480

HAL Id: hal-03244480

<https://u-paris.hal.science/hal-03244480>

Submitted on 12 Nov 2021

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Femtosecond broadband frequency switch of terahertz three-dimensional meta-atoms

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Abstract:

We present the experimental demonstration of a sub-picosecond all-optical THz switch based on three-dimensional (3D) terahertz meta-atoms. Combining a special design of 3D meta-devices and the ultrafast dynamics of low temperature grown Gallium Arsenide, we can modulate the reflectance of the THz micro-cavities within 2.2 picoseconds. The device enables a 280 GHz switch in resonance frequency within less than 200 fs. The switch back to the original resonance takes 800 fs. Experimental results show that the speed values are strongly convoluted by the THz probing field and thus the real switching times are even shorter, in the few 100 fs range.

Keywords: metasurfaces, photoswitching, ultrafast modulation, carrier dynamics,

From the early days when metamaterials were used for textbook demonstrations of novel electromagnetic (EM) response¹⁻³, a natural course of action has been their hybridization with optoelectronic devices in view of implementing novel functionalities and improved performances. Meta-devices have been demonstrated in a vast number of research fields and over several spectral ranges of the EM spectrum⁴. In the Terahertz (THz) range, there have been numerous works developing components that can for instance modulate amplitude and phase⁵⁻⁹ of an incoming laser beam. It is also of interest to combine the sub-wavelength resonators that compose the meta-materials themselves with emitters or detectors to benefit from their circuital properties and extreme confinement. In this respect, the combination of metasurfaces with quantum cascade structures in the mid-infrared (MIR) and THz range has been an active field of research¹⁰⁻¹⁴. In particular, it was recently shown to be a relevant approach to increase the operating temperature of quantum well infrared photodetector by a significant reduction of their active surface (and in turn dark current) while maintaining their photon capture efficiency¹⁵. Furthermore, in THz quantum electrodynamics, LC resonators have been proposed to test the bosonization limit with few electrons in strong coupling¹⁶. The strong coupling regime between light and matter is also interesting as it opens up several possibilities for the development of non-classical light emitters¹⁷⁻¹⁹, that could be envisioned even up to room temperature at THz frequencies with the use of graded alloy parabolic quantum well (QW)²⁰. In such regime, the coupling strength between light and matter is so strong that new quasi-particles named polaritons arise. An important figure of merit to enter in this regime of interaction is the overlap between the device active region and the EM field. As the latter one is extremely sub-wavelength sized for metamaterials, this is quite challenging. Furthermore, standard planar metamaterial configurations cannot be used as intersubband (ISB) transitions interact only with transverse magnetic (TM) polarized light. An alternative exists at GHz frequency with the use of transverse electric (TE) polarized Landau levels coupled with planar metastructures²¹. In fact, it has been successfully used to study sub-cycle non-adiabatic physics in a very recent publication²². Nevertheless, it remains incompatible with a room temperature outlook strategy, since Landau polaritons require cryogenic temperature (10K or less) and the use of an external magnetic field. Several three-dimensional (3D) architectures have been proposed in recent years²³⁻²⁶, that have led to the demonstration of the strong coupling regime with ISB transitions²⁷⁻²⁹. These 3D architectures are interesting as they offer relatively high overlap factor with a field polarization compatible with ISB transitions. Nevertheless, the integration of ultrafast switching functionality to these architectures remains a challenge.

Meta-structures are ideal tools to enable optoelectronic devices with fast switching functionalities. Usually, the switching process relies on the conductivity change of a photosensitive material placed at the vicinity of a capacitance within the LC circuit. Under illumination with a near infrared (NIR) light

pulse, electron-hole pairs are created. This modifies the complex refractive index of the medium ideally leading to a short-circuit of the capacitive element. In turn, the overall capacitance of the circuit is modified along with the resonant frequency of the system. To this end, several photosensitive materials, which can operate at room temperature, have been explored at THz frequencies, with the most common ones being semiconductors, 2D and phase transition materials⁹. The faster modulation speeds of the overall switching cycle (ON / OFF) reported so far are in the range of tens of picoseconds^{30–33}.

In this letter, we report on the demonstration of a femtosecond switchable device based on three-dimensional LC micro-resonators with an overall modulation speed of 2ps. This is actually an upper limit, as the recorded response is convoluted with the probe pulse. We use the circuital properties of the system to implement a secondary in-series capacitance and change its conductivity under NIR ultrafast laser pulse illumination. We choose low-temperature grown (LT)-GaAs as the photo-switching material to benefit from its intrinsic ultrafast carriers excitation and recombination rate^{34–37}. Using a state-of-the-art THz time domain spectrometer, we observe that the LC circuit can operate on two states whose resonance frequencies are separated by 280 GHz, and it is possible to switch it from one to the other with an optical control beam. A switching ON time of 200 fs has been measured along with a recombination time (switch OFF) lasting 800 fs, both recorded values being limited by the probing system time resolution. The overall modulation cycle last for 2.2 picoseconds as the system remains in the main switched mode for 1.2 ps. These results constitute record timing values for a THz signal amplitude modulation.

A schematic of the experimental approach is presented in Figure 1a, along with an equivalent circuit representation of the device in Figure 1b. An array of LC cavities is fabricated on top of a host substrate (GaAs) on which a 2- μm -thick LT-GaAs layer was grown. We have not performed a post-growth annealing step, to preserve a high density of trapping states and its ultra-fast (femtosecond) recombination times³⁵. To optically access the ultra-fast switching layer, a ring opening (width of 1.4 μm) is formed into the ground plane of each unit cell, implementing a photo-switchable capacitance within the circuit. The unit cells are repeated on a square 2D array of period $\Lambda=22 \mu\text{m}$. The main capacitive section (C_{cavity}) of the circuit is made of a silicon dioxide (SiO_2) patch that is fabricated *via* plasma enhanced chemical vapour deposition (PECVD) followed by reactive ion etching (RIE). The radius of the patch cavity is 2.4 μm with a height of 370 nm, resulting in an extremely small effective confinement volume of $V_{\text{eff}}=3.10^{-6}\lambda_0^3$. Finally, the inductive section of the circuit is obtained using an original micro-fabrication technique that allows to form an air-bridge metallic antenna²⁴. The confined electric field of the resonant mode along two different planes is depicted in Figure 1c,d. Most of the field is confined within the cavity section, with the electric field (E_z) orthogonal to the plane. This

confinement permits the interaction with ISB transitions in semiconductor quantum wells (QW), that are the dipoles commonly employed for achieving strong light-matter coupling in this frequency range²⁷.

The resonance frequency of the system is given by $1/\sqrt{LC}$, where C stands as the equivalent capacitance of the circuit, equal to $1/C_{eq.} = 1/C_{ring} + 1/C_{cavity}$. In turn, the expected photo-switched frequency will depend on the relative value of each capacitance and their respective balance. We calculated the value of each of them as a function of increasing patch radius while keeping the ring-opening dimension constant. This leads to a crossing point in between these two values that marks the relative frequency shift of the switch (Figure 1e). The device can be engineered to exhibit either a red or a blue frequency shift of the photo-activated resonance. The value of the frequency shift is reported in the upper panel of Figure 1e. This level of flexibility is of interest as it permits to optimize the device design in accordance with the constraints coming from either the active material to be used and/or the available bandwidth of the measurement system. Note: an iso-frequency behaviour can be obtained by changing accordingly the value of the inductance, as thoroughly discussed in Ref.²⁴. Figure 1f shows a Scanning Electron Microscope (SEM) image of a typical fabricated device. We have also fabricated complementary devices with no ring opening in the ground plane. Those devices, named LC resonators, allow us to measure the resonant frequency of the circuit with a single capacitance (see the SEM picture on the lower panel of Figure 1f). This represents the ideal configuration of a fully switched device, i.e. a device where the NIR pulse illumination has brought the permittivity of the LT-GaAs close to the one of a metallic layer.

We have probed both devices using a THz time-domain spectrometer based on the two-colour filamentation generation scheme³⁸, which provides broadband THz pulses with a spectral bandwidth that exceeds 20 THz. The THz electric-field transient is probed using an Air-Biased-Coherent-Detection (ABCD) sampling technique^{38,39}. ABCD offers a larger bandwidth detection (up to 20 THz) and can resolve faster transients than the classic electro-optic technique with non-linear crystals, although with less sensitivity. The probed LC micro-resonators are made of spatially separated lumped elements, and they present specific light coupling rules as discussed in Ref.²⁴. The optimal configuration allows exciting both electric and magnetic dipoles of the device. Figure 2a shows the reflectance of both the LC resonator and the LC switch devices at an incidence angle of 45 degrees and TM light polarization. We have obtained it by applying a Fast Fourier Transform to the recorded THz electric field transients. The native resonance of the LC switch (green curve; no illumination) indicates a frequency of 2.36 THz. In black, we measured the resonance of the LC resonator control device with a fully metallic ground plane at 2.1 THz. It mimics the ideal case, where the ring-opening material reaches metallic

conductivity values upon optical excitation with the fs laser pulse. This configuration would offer a 260 GHz frequency shift between the two eigen modes of the device.

The switching functionality along with its time dynamics have been assessed using a synchronized collinear NIR pump pulse ($\lambda \sim 800\text{nm}$, 35 fs duration). The diameter of the NIR beam was larger than the THz probe beam, ensuring uniform excitation over on the sample where we probed an estimated number of 31 776 resonators. The collinearity prevents any further time delay that could be added by a geometrical mismatch of the two beams' wavefronts. Under illumination (blue line in Figure 2a), the circuit oscillates on a second resonance at a red-shifted frequency of 2.08 THz. This corresponds to a 280 GHz frequency shift, slightly higher than the expected value from the control LC resonator sample (black line) but less pronounced. The difference in the observed photoinduced frequency shift compared to the net LC circuit is linked to the achievable level of photoinduced conductivity change of the LT-GaAs.

To confirm this, we performed experiments demonstrating that the maximum achievable conductivity under IR laser excitation reaches values that are lower than the metallic ones. Figure 2b shows the recorded relative change of reflectivity ($\Delta R/R$) on a bare LT-GaAs wafer at different levels of fluence. For each fluence the THz reflectance spectrum is recorded and compared to the dark case without NIR illumination ($\Delta R/R = (R_{\text{illu.}} - R_{\text{dark}})/R_{\text{dark}}$). Data are shown in the spectral region of interest, here at 2.1 THz. One can see that above a fluence of 2mJ/cm^2 , the relative reflectivity is saturating, and no further change can be obtained with increasing fluence. The saturated reflectivity of the LT-GaAs surface is approximately half that of a gold surface.

Considering this fact, we performed a series of simulations by changing the conductivity of the ring capacitance within the LC switch device. Figure 2c shows the LC switch resonance for three different values of conductivity within the LT-GaAs layer. The conductivity values are chosen to fit the experimental data and are expressed in siemens per meter (S/m). The simulations confirms that our experimental observation corresponds to an intermediate case (blue curve) where the switch capacitance has not reached the permittivity of a metal yet (black curve). In turn, this leads to a damped response of the system and a lower contrast of the switched mode.

Let us now focus on the time dynamics of the device. Figure 3 shows a 2-dimensional map of the frequency switch as a function of the delay between the NIR pulse and the THz probe. One can observe that the main frequency is red shifted by 280 GHz. The overall process takes about 2.2 picoseconds to transition from the switched mode back to the initial state. Thanks to the high temporal resolution of the ABCD technique, we can observe fine details within the overall cycle. For instance, one can observe a broadening of the initial mode prior to the switching process. The rise of the switched mode (ON

process) occurs on an extremely short time of 200 fs. The switched mode lasts for about 1.2 ps prior to recombination of the excited carriers while the OFF modulation takes 800 fs before reaching back to the initial frequency of the device at 2.4THz.

Such details in the dynamics have been revealed thanks to the high-resolution ABCD detection scheme. Indeed, if the ABCD is replaced with electro-optic detection using a ZnTe crystal much longer time dynamics are observed due to the significantly smaller detection bandwidth. In figure 3b, we provide the bare time traces of the THz pulse recorded with both techniques. The THz pulse envelope when recorded with ABCD (~ 190 fs FWHM) is twice shorter than the one recorded with the ZnTe crystal (~ 400 fs FWHM). We have then probed the change of reflectivity as a function of the time delay with the NIR pump, on the bare LT-GaAs layer (right panel of Figure 3b). This change in reflectivity is recorded at the maximum of the THz pulse electric field and depicts the dynamic of excited carriers within the LT-GaAs layer. As expected from previous literature results, for both cases one can observe a sharp rise after the excitation of carriers followed by a slower exponential decay. In the case of ABCD technique, both the rise (~ 200 fs) and the decay times (~ 800 fs) are twice faster than in the case of ZnTe crystal which illustrate that the recorded dynamic is clearly convoluted by the probe THz pulse duration. Thus, one can expect even shorter time features to emerge with this device. We further observe that the real electrical current of the LC circuit oscillates 1.2ps on the switched mode before decaying back to the natural frequency of the circuit. This waiting time is not present in the time-resolved reflectivity measurements on bare LT-GaAs (Fig. 3b, right panel), suggesting that this feature is peculiar to the LC circuit. We do not have a final explanation for this observation, which is beyond the scope of this paper, and that we will try to elucidate in a future work. However, the switching values reported here are compatible with the non-adiabatic timing needed for the observation of the dynamical Casimir effect, while the overall THz signal modulation speed (ON/OFF) compete with the ones from the literature.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated a meta-surface, made of an array of 3D THz meta-atoms that permits to switch between two resonant states on femtosecond timescales. The resonant frequencies of the two states are separated by 280 GHz. Our next step is to combine this ultrafast frequency switch with the ISB transition dipoles of parabolic quantum wells to operate in the strong coupling regime at room temperature²⁰. We will avoid perturbing the active semiconductor cavity with the NIR pump pulse by illuminating the Lt-GaAs layer from the back, using a transparent substrate as recently demonstrated⁴⁰. This system would constitute a valuable tool to investigate the dynamics of polariton build-up, along with the possibility to generate non-classical states of light *via* the mechanism of dynamic Casimir radiation at room temperature^{41,42}. The devices presented in this work also holds good promise as ultrafast THz amplitude modulators with picosecond modulation speed.

Acknowledgments:

We warmly thank I. Carusotto for useful discussions. We acknowledge financial support from the European Union FET-Open Grant MIRBOSE (737017) and from the French National Research Agency (project ANR-18-CE24-0013 “TERASEL” and ANR-17-CE24-0016 “IRENA”). This work was partially supported by the French RENATECH network.

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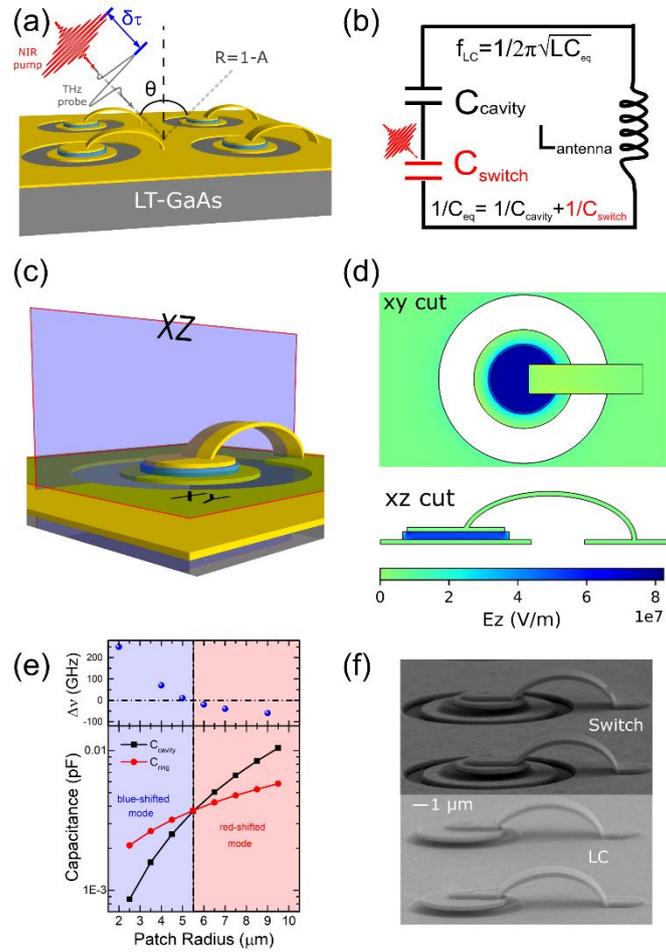


Figure 1: (a) Schematic representation of the experimental approach with the array of LC switches probed by a THz pulse and photo-excited by a synchronized NIR pulse. (b) Equivalent circuit of the device (c) Schematic representation of a single LC-switch resonator with two planes cut represented (d) Simulated confined electric field in the z direction for both plane cuts. (e) Calculated capacitance value of the ring and the cavity as function of the patch radius. The ring opening size is kept constant at $1.4\mu\text{m}$. (f) Scanning Electron Microscope picture of the fabricated device.

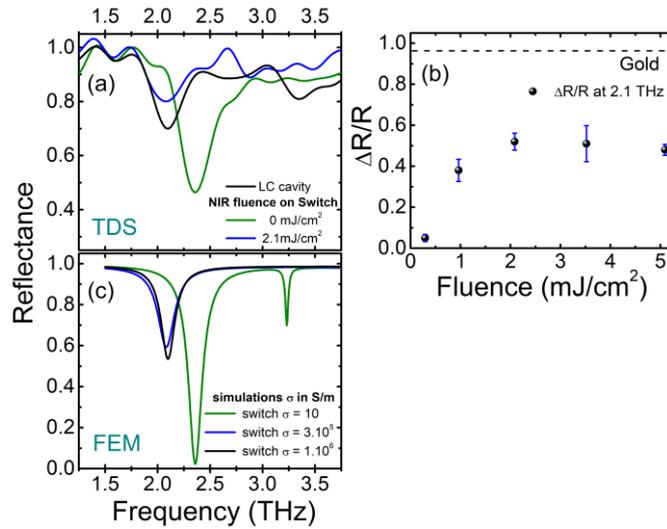


Figure 2: (a) Reflectance of the LC resonator (black line) with TDS technique at 45 degrees incidence along with the reflectance of the LC switch with and without illumination (green/ blue curves). A 280 GHz shift is experimentally observed between the natural eigen mode (green) and the photo-activated one under 2.1 mJ/cm² of NIR illumination (blue). (b) Relative reflectivity ($\Delta R/R = (R_{\text{illu.}} - R_{\text{dark}})/R_{\text{dark}}$) of a bare LT-GaAs sample at different fluence and for a frequency of 2.1THz. The relative change of reflectivity saturates at a fluence of 2.1 mJ/cm², a value nearly twice smaller than the one of a metallic surface. (c) FEM simulations of the switch device for different value of conductivity (in S/m) within the substrate. Note the good agreement with the experimental value presented above.

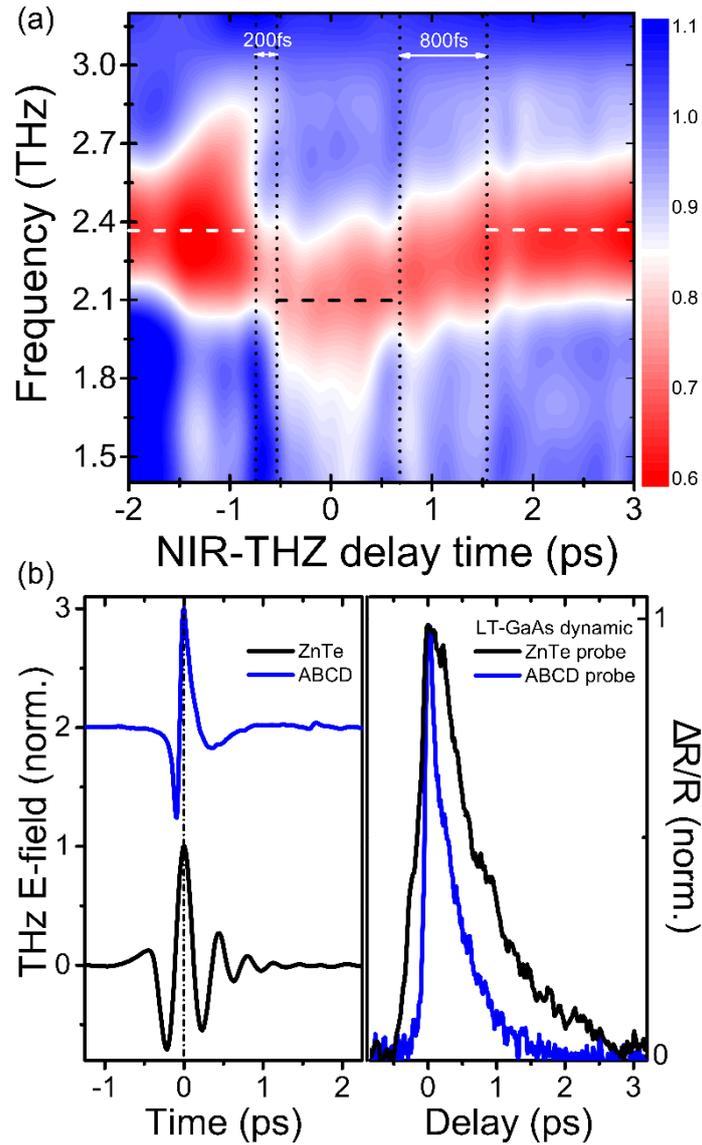


Figure 3: (a) Two-dimensional map of the spectral reflectance as a function of the time delay between the THz pulse and the NIR pulse. The initial frequency is depicted with white dashed lines while the switched mode with a black one. Note the sub-ps time scale of the switch ON and OFF towards the photoactivated mode. This mode remains active for a duration of 1.2 ps. (b) bare temporal traces of the THz electric field recorded with electro-optic (ZnTe) and air biased (ABCD) sampling techniques. Right panel. Carriers dynamic within the bare LT-GaAs wafer as a function of the time delay with the NIR pump pulse recorded with both techniques.