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1	Origin of surface charge of double network hydrogels prepared by
2	sequential polymerization
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16 Abstract

17 Understanding the physicochemical properties of hydrogel surfaces and their molecular origins is 18 important for their applications. In this paper, we elucidate the molecular origin of surface charges in double-network hydrogels synthesized by two-step sequential polymerization. Synthesis of hydrogels 19 20 by free-radical polymerization does not fully complete the reaction, leaving a small amount of 21 unreacted monomers. When this approach is used to synthesize double network (DN) hydrogels by 22 two-step sequential polymerization from charged monomers for the first network and neutral 23 monomers for the second network, the unreacted 1st network monomers are incorporated into the 24 2^{nd} network. Since the surface of such DN hydrogels is covered with a µm-thick layer of the neutral second network, the incorporation of a small amount of charged monomers into the 2nd network 25 26 increases the surface charge and, thereby, their repulsive/adhesive properties. Therefore, we propose 27 a method to remove unreacted monomers and modulate the surface charge density of DN hydrogels.

- 28
- 29 Keywords: double-network hydrogel, co-polymer, free-radical polymerization, surface charge
- 30 density, Donnan potential



2nd network: PAAm





poly(AAm-co-AMPS)

33 Double network (DN) hydrogels are macromolecules with high water storage and load-bearing capacity^{1–3}, applied in industrial^{4,5} and biomedical applications^{6,7} because of their excellent mechanical 34 performance and their similarity to biological tissue. The DN hydrogel has an interpenetrating structure 35 of two separate hydrophilic polymer networks of contrasting architecture and mechanical properties; 36 typically, a 1st network that is a highly crosslinked polyelectrolyte and at a low molar concentration 37 functions as a rigid and brittle network, and a 2nd network consisting of a loosely crosslinked electrically 38 neutral polymer that is soft and ductile⁸. The DN hydrogel is synthesized via a two-step sequential free-39 40 radical polymerization where in the first step, the rigid 1st network is synthesized from an electrolyte 41 monomer such as 2-acrylamido-2-methylpropanesulfonic acid (AMPS) of high-concentration in the presence of crosslinker and photo-initiator. In the second step, the as-prepared poly 2-acrylamido-2-42 methylpropanesulfonic acid (PAMPS) hydrogel is immersed in an aqueous precursor solution 43 containing the 2nd network monomers such as acrylamide (AAm), low amount of crosslinker and a 44 45 photo-initiator. After the 1st network hydrogel reaches swelling equilibrium in the precursor solution 46 of the second network, the 2nd polymerization is performed in the presence of the 1st polyelectrolyte 47 network⁹.

Having a charged polyelectrolyte as the 1st network allows the synthesis of tough hydrogels but limits the regulation of the surface charge concentration¹⁰. This is an obstacle to overcome because these charges of hydrogels play a crucial role in surface applications such as lubrication and adhesion¹¹. E.g. when hydrogels are used as implants, charged surfaces lead to the accumulation of proteins, which in consequence leads to cell adhesion and an inflammatory response^{12,13}. Therefore, the regulation of the surface properties of DN hydrogels is crucial for their applicability.

Previous approaches to control the DN hydrogel surface properties deploy the hydrophobicity/hydrophilicity of polymerization molding substrate¹⁴, the interfacial modification, and subsequent grafting of polymer brushes¹⁵ or micro-patterning^{16,17}. In our previous study, we described the formation of a surface layer of the 2nd network polymer on top of the DN hydrogel bulk based on the electrostatic repulsion between the glass molding substrate and 1st network polyelectrolyte hydrogel¹⁴. The surface of such DN hydrogels, however, exhibits a charge density higher than expected
from the neutral polymer network for the DN hydrogels.

61 An explanation is that the increased charge density is related to the incorporation of unreacted monomers from the 1st network polymerization step in the neutral 2nd network. In most cases of free-62 radical polymerization, like the 1st network synthesis, the reaction does not run to completion^{18,19}. 63 64 Since high monomer concentration (~ M) was used for the first network formation, the unreacted 65 residual monomer as high as sub-mM order could be present even for a reaction of 99.99% completion. For single network (SN) hydrogels, these residual monomers are removed to an undetectable level by 66 67 washing the hydrogels in water after polymerization in multiple cycles, and the amount of residual monomers is at a minimum at use. However, in the DN hydrogel synthesis, the 1st network hydrogel is 68 immediately after synthesis immersed in the 2nd network precursor solution (Scheme 1A). This is 69 performed to reach the high molar ratio of 20/1 - 30/1 between the 2nd and the 1st network required 70 71 for excellent mechanical performance⁹. Because of this two-step sequential polymerization, the unreacted 1st network monomers could freely equilibrate in the 2nd network precursor solution. With 72 the subsequent synthesis of the 2nd network, the unreacted 1st network monomers could be 73 incorporated in the 2nd network so that the 2nd network is a co-polymer with a small fraction of the 1st 74 75 charged monomers.

To verify this assumption, we deployed electric conductivity measurements on monomer solution and electric potential measurements on DN hydrogels and corresponding SN hydrogels. We deployed the microelectrode technique (MET) to precisely quantify the charge concentration at the surface layer of DN hydrogels. MET measures the Donnan potential of a hydrogel equilibrated in a bath solution through the insertion of an extremely thin capillary electrode into the hydrogel^{20,21}.

We synthesized DN hydrogels using PAMPS as the 1st network and polyacrylamide (PAAm) as the 2nd network. Here we varied the volume ratio V_r of the as-prepared PAMPS 1st network hydrogel (V_{PAMPS}) and the 2nd network precursor solution (V_{AAm}) that the PAMPS hydrogel is immersed in (**Scheme 1B**). By doing so, we expect to change the concentration of unreacted AMPS monomers in the 2nd network

precursor solution. First, we measure the conductivity of the 2nd network precursor solution with 85 different volume ratios V_r and estimate the unreacted AMPS monomers concentration ($C_{AMPS,R}$) in the 86 2^{nd} network precursor solution. Second, we measure the electric potentials ($\Delta \varphi$) and estimate the 87 charge concentration (C_G) in the surface layer of the DN hydrogels. These results (C_G) were compared 88 to that of the SN hydrogels synthesized from the 2nd network precursor solution (PAAm-ps). A DN 89 90 hydrogel where the residual 1st network AMPS monomers were removed from the PAMPS hydrogel by a washing step with water (PAMPS-w) prior to immersion in the 2nd network precursor solution was 91 also measured for comparison. Third, the charge concentration (C_{G}) of DN hydrogels and SN hydrogels 92 from the 2nd network precursor solution (PAAm-ps) was compared to that of co-polymer hydrogels 93 94 (poly(AAm-co-AMPS)) synthesized from a solution containing a similar concentration of the unreacted 95 AMPS monomers concentration ($C_{AMPS,R}$). These comparisons allow us to understand the magnitude of impact the incorporation of unreacted $\mathbf{1}^{st}$ network monomers in the $\mathbf{2}^{nd}$ network has on the DN 96 97 hydrogel surface charge density. The hydrogel formulations are found in Table 1 and Table S1, and 98 details on the experimental methods are found in the supporting information. For the reason of 99 simplification, the AMPS concentrations in the precursor solution of the co-polymers (poly(AAm-co-100 AMPS)) are also referred to as $C_{AMPS,R}$.

101

1 Table 1: Hydrogel sample codes and formulations

Sample code	PAMPS - 1 st network			PAAm - 2 nd network		
	Monomer	Crosslinker*	Initiator*	Monomer	Crosslinker	Initiator*
	(M)	(mol%)	(mol%)	(M)	(mol%)	(mol%)
PAMPS (-w)	1	3	1	-	-	-
PAAm (-ps)	-	-	-	2	0,1	0,1
PAMPS/PAAm	1	3	1	2	0,1	0,1

*The mol% of crosslinker N,N'-methylenebis(acrylamide), and initiator 2-oxoglutaric acid are relative to the concentration of monomer.





Scheme 1: (A) The scheme and (B) the methodology to prove the incorporation of unreacted residual 105 1st network monomers (AMPS) in the 2nd polymer network (PAAm). Performed by (1) monitoring the 106 removal of unreacted monomers of as-prepared PAMPS hydrogel, (2) the detection of unreacted 107 AMPS monomers in the 2nd network precursor solution, and (3) the quantification of surface charge 108 density of the synthesized PAMPS/PAAm DN and corresponding SN hydrogels. 109

110 Monomers of polyelectrolytes such as AMPS are highly soluble in water and unreacted monomers 111 could be extracted from the hydrogel by washing with water. The concentration of the unreacted 112 monomer $(C_{AMPS,R})$ can be determined by measuring the ionic conductivity of the hydrogel washing water²². We can use this method to monitor the transport of AMPS from the hydrogel into the bathing 113 solution. Initially, we established the calibration curves in Figure 1A for the correlation between the 114 ionic conductivity and the AMPS concentration (C_{AMPS}) in water and in 2nd network precursor solution. 115 These calibration curves show that the detection down to 2×10^{-3} mM of C_{AMPS} in water and down to 116 117 0,1 mM of C_{AMPS} in AAm is possible.

118 PAMPS hydrogels were synthesized as described in the supporting information, and unreacted monomers were removed via immersing PAMPS hydrogel (V_{PAMPS}) in water (V_{H2O}) at a volume ratio V_r 119 of 0,02. For samples equilibrated in water without daily water exchange, conductivity constantly 120 stayed high at CAMPS, R of 0,6 mM. On the sample with daily water exchange (PAMPS-w), where the ionic 121 122 conductivity measurements of the washing water were performed after 24 hours of incubation, Figure 123 **1B** shows that $C_{AMPS,R}$ in H₂O decreased fast and after 5 -7 days stayed constant below 0,05 mM, 124 corresponding to the ionic conductivity of fewer than 2 μ S/cm. The results indicate the necessity to 125 wash hydrogels for at least 5 - 7 days to reduce the concentration of unreacted residual AMPS 126 molecules from the 1st network polymerization. It needs to be mentioned that the conductivity measurements give the overall results of electric conduction from both cationic and anionic species. 127



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Figure 1: Determine $C_{AMPS,R}$ in the hydrogel washing procedure for PAMPS-w. (A) Calibration curves for the ionic conductivity of AMPS in water and in the 2nd network precursor solution with various concentration C_{AMPS} . (B) The reduction of $C_{AMPS,R}$ in the washing water of the PAMPS-w hydrogel (V_r

132 0,02) by daily water exchange, indicating the removal of unreacted monomers.

To investigate if the residual AMPS amount reaches a detectable concentration in 2nd network 133 134 precursor solution, the washed PAMPS-w and the as-prepared PAMPS hydrogels were immersed in 2 M AAm containing 0,1 mol% crosslinker and 0,1 mol% photoinitiator and ionic conductivity was 135 measured for 3 days. Figure 2A visualizes the increase of conductivity in the AAm solution with 136 137 immersion time. By immersing bigger volumes of PAMPS hydrogels (VPAMPS) in AAm solution (VAAm) at volume ratios V_r (= V_{PAMPS}/V_{AAm}), we achieved higher conductivities at the equilibrium time. This 138 139 demonstrates that residual AMPS monomers diffuse into the AAm solution and that the equilibrium $C_{AMPS,R}$ depends on the volume ratio V_r between the immersed 1st network hydrogel and 2nd network 140 141 precursor solution. By using the calibration curve shown in **Figure 1A**, we obtain the equilibrium $C_{AMPS,R}$ for various V_r (Figure 2B). The tested volume ratios V_r of 0,01 and 0,02 are widely applied ratios in the 142 laboratory format because these ratios generate less 2nd network precursor waste solution. We see 143 144 that $C_{AMPS,R}$ reaches 0,46 – 0,81 mM, which could affect the charge density of the DN hydrogel. This 145 amount of $C_{AMPS,R}$ relates to a conversion rate from monomer to polymer of approximately 95 %. In 146 contrast, when the washed PAMPS-w hydrogel is immersed in AAm solution, the conductivity stays 147 stable and shows comparable results to the conductivity of pure AAm solution (Table S2). This shows that the PAMPS-w washing procedure effectively reduces C_{AMPS,R} in the 2nd network precursor solution 148 to a concentration below the conductivity measurement detection limit of 0,1 mM shown in Figure 149 **1A**. It should be noted that due to the small volume ratio V_r (< 0,02), the concentration of AAm 150 151 monomers in the precursor solution of the second network hardly changes by the immersion of the PAMPS network. The effect of impurities in the 2nd network precursor solution and hydrolysis of the 152 polymer on the conductivity can be neglected because its conductivity is mainly defined through the 153 154 initiator and residual AMPS (Figure S1).



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Figure 2: Determining the concentration of the 1st network monomer in the 2nd network precursor solution. (A) The time profiles of ionic conductivity after the immersion of the as-prepared PAMPS hydrogels in AAm solutions with volume ratios (V_r) ranging from 0,02 to 0,001. (B) The equilibrium residual AMPS monomer concentration in AAm solutions $C_{AMPS,R}$ as a function of the volume ratios (V_r). $C_{AMPS,R}$ was calculated from conductivity. For comparison, the results after the immersion of the prewashed PAMPS-w at V_r 0,02 was also shown.

hydrogels surface charge density C_G after synthesis, we deployed electric potential measurements by using MET. When a polyelectrolyte hydrogel is equilibrated in a salt solution, a characteristic distribution of small mobile ions inside and outside of the gels is created, which generates an electrostatic potential difference (Donnan potential) at the gel-solution interface $\Delta \varphi^{20,21}$:

To determine if higher concentrations of $C_{AMPS,R}$ in the 2nd network precursor solution increase the DN

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$$\Delta \varphi = \frac{RT}{zF} ln \left(\frac{\gamma_S \times C_S}{\gamma_G \times C_G} \right) \quad (Eq. 1)$$

Here, *R* is the gas constant, *T* is the absolute temperature, *z* is the valence of the small mobile ions, *F* is the Faraday constant, γ and *C* are the activity coefficient and the concentration of the small mobile ion of interest, respectively, in bath solution (γ_s , C_s) and in the gel (γ_G , C_G). By measuring the Donnan potential of the hydrogel in a low salt solution, we can estimate the counter ion concentration C_G in the surface layer of DN hydrogels. This C_G equals the charge concentration incorporated in the surface layer according to the charge neutrality condition.

We found (**Figure 3**, 1-3) that the electric potential difference to the bath solution at the DN hydrogel surfaces $\Delta \varphi$ increased with the $C_{AMPS,R}$ (low to high) while the bulk electric potential (dark grey area) was constantly low at values around -150 to -160 mV. The DN hydrogel synthesized with the washed PAMPS-w hydrogel (green box) had the lowest $\Delta \varphi$ of -16,7 ± 3,2 mV among the DN hydrogels, which indicates that the residual AMPS monomers are incorporated in the 2nd network of PAAm. The difference in electric potential between the surface layer and the bulk of DN hydrogel indicates the presence of a surface layer of several µm-thick, which is consistent with the previous study¹⁴.

The surface electric potential could also be influenced by the limited swelling of the 2nd network 181 182 confined in the 1st network structure and a change of distribution of ions in the gel. To investigate the 183 influence of confinement, SN AAm hydrogels were synthesized from the residual 2nd network precursor 184 solution 3 days after the immersion of the PAMPS hydrogel (PAAm-ps). The electric surface potentials 185 of the PAAm-ps hydrogels (Figure 3, 4-6) are similar to the potentials found in the surface layer of the 186 corresponding PAMPS/PAAm DN hydrogels, showing that the surface layer of the DN hydrogel is 187 swelling freely and thus not affect the electric potential at the surface. It needs to be mentioned that 188 based on this measurement, we cannot account for non-uniform swelling that does not affect the 189 electric potential.

To strengthen the claim that $C_{AMPS,R}$ regulates $\Delta \varphi$ at the DN hydrogel surface, a control group of poly(AAm-co-AMPS) hydrogels were tested (formulation in **Table S1**). The co-polymer hydrogels, having similar concentrations of AMPS in feed with that of residual AMPS in the second network precursor solution of DN hydrogels, show similar electric surface potentials (**Figure 3**, 7-9) to the ones of the PAMPS/PAAm DN hydrogels.





Figure 3: Electric potential profiles of hydrogels $\Delta \varphi$ **measured by MET.** DN hydrogels (PAMPS/PAAm, 1-3), the corresponding PAAm hydrogel synthesized from the AAm precursor solution (PAAm-ps, 4-6), and the co-polymer hydrogel (poly(AAm-co-AMPS), 7-9). The profile backgrounds in white, grey, and dark grey indicate the potential in the bathing solution, in the hydrogel surface layer, and in the hydrogel bulk, respectively. The potential differences between blue arrows indicate the electric surface potential $\Delta \varphi$ of hydrogels relative to bath solution ($C_s = 10^{-4}$ M NaCl aq. solution). (1 and 4) The green frames indicate the samples prepared with pre-washed PAMPS-w as the 1st network.

206 When we compare the charge density C_{G_r} calculated from the electric potential $\Delta \varphi$ (Eq. 1) between 207 the sample groups, it is observable that at the same $C_{AMPS,R}$, the co-polymers show a lower charge 208 density than that of PAMPS/PAAm DN hydrogels and PAAm-ps hydrogels (Figure 4A). To investigate 209 where the discrepancy in the electric potential measurements originates from, the hydrogel swelling after 2^{nd} network polymerization in the MET bath solution Q was correlated with the C_{AMPS,R} since 210 211 hydrogel swelling is linked to the fixed ions of the hydrogel. Here it was found that in the range of 0,07-212 0,81 mM CAMPS, PAAm-ps, and Poly(AAm-co-AMPS) hydrogels have almost the same Q of about 2, 213 independent of CAMP5, (Figure 4B). This result indicates that a small amount of charges incorporated 214 into the PAAm hydrogels hardly influence their swelling ability. This conclusion is also confirmed by the results of macroscopic mechanical properties, which were constant in the observation range of C_G (Figure S2).

Next, we investigate the correlation between the true surface charge density incorporated in the PAAm 217 218 network and CAMP5,R in the precursor solution. Since the hydrogels swelled in the bath solution for 219 performing the MET, the values C_G measured by MET should be corrected, taking into consideration 220 the swelling. It is assumed that the surface layer of DN hydrogel should have the same swelling ratio 221 as that of PAAm-ps, although the bulk of DN hydrogel hardly swells (Figure S3). So, for DN hydrogel, 222 the Q of PAAm-ps was used in the calculation of C_GQ of its surface layer. The plot of C_GQ against $C_{AMPS,R}$ 223 is shown in Figure 4C, where C_GQ stands for the true charge density incorporated in the PAAm hydrogel 224 at the as-prepared state. With this plot, we can elucidate if all the charges in the PAAm gels are from 225 residual monomer of $C_{AMPS,R}$ or not. For the co-polymer, when $C_{AMPS,R} \leq 0,2$ mM, C_GQ is bigger than 226 $C_{AMPS,R}$ because C_{GQ} in this region is dominated by the weak charges of the PAAm network. When 227 $C_{AMPS,R} > 0,2$ mM, C_GQ is smaller than $C_{AMPS,R}$ which can be accounted for by a low polymerization 228 efficiency of the AMPS monomer at the tested low $C_{AMPS,R}$ and polymer ratios of $C_{AMPS,R}/C_{AAm} \le 1/98$ 229 (**Table S2**). Surprisingly, we found that the $C_{G}Q$ of PAMPS/PAAm and PAAm-ps is always higher than 230 $C_{AMP5,R}$. This deviation with the co-polymer indicates an underestimation of $C_{AMP5,R}$ in the second 231 network monomer solution.

232 This could be caused by two connected effects. First, the underestimation of C_{AMPS,R}. The incomplete 233 reaction of the 1st network gives not only unreacted AMPS monomers but also oligomers and sols that can dissolve in the 2nd network precursor solution. These oligomers also contribute to electric 234 235 conductivity but less per monomeric unit in comparison with monomers. Therefore, the CAMPS, R from 236 conductivity using AMPS monomer solution as calibration curve could be underestimated²³. Second, 237 the oligomers and sols could also be incorporated into the second network. It is known that by free radical polymerization, some vinyl groups of the 1st network crosslinker have not reacted⁸. Through 238 239 these unreacted crosslinkers, the oligomers or sols could also be incorporated into the PAAm-ps and 240 PAMPS/PAAm hydrogels.

In summary, the results in **Figure 3 and 4** clearly show that the surface charge density of the PAMPS/PAAm DN gels could sensitively change with the polymerization procedures and should be carefully quantified by MET. The plot of C_GQ against $C_{AMPS,R}$ could be used as a calibration curve to get the required surface charge density of the hydrogels for a well-controlled experiment. Here we emphasize that the amount of unreacted first network monomer copolymerized in the second network is in mM concentration, and it is too low to be detected by ATR-FTIR (**Figure S4**)¹⁴. This work also demonstrates that MET is a powerful method to characterize the electric properties of hydrogels.



249 Figure 4: True Charge density C_GQ in the surface layer of hydrogels. (A) C_G in the surface layer as a 250 function of the residual AMPS concentration C_{AMP,R} in the precursor solution of gels. (B) The swelling 251 ratio Q of the bulk hydrogels in the state of MET measurement against CAMPS, R in the precursor solution 252 of the PAAm network. For PAMPS/PAAm, only the Q of the surface layer is relevant, so its Q of the bulk 253 is not shown to avoid confusion. (C) True surface charge C_GQ in the surface layer of hydrogels as a 254 function of CAMP,R in the precursor solution of gels. For PAMPS/PAAm, the Q of PAAm-ps was used in 255 the calculation C_GQ for its surface layer. The orange-yellow background in (C) indicates the area $C_{AMP,R}$ 256 > C_GQ . The red dashed lines in (A, B, C) indicate the results of pure PAAm (**Table S2**). The Error ranges in the figure indicate STD for n = 3 - 5 measurements per hydrogel. The activity coefficients in the bath 257 258 solution (γ_{s}) and in the gel (γ_{G}) are set to 1 in calculating C_{G} from $\Delta \varphi$ using equation 1.

260 We documented here, to our knowledge for the first time, that unreacted monomers from the 1st network polymerization diffuse into the 2nd network precursor solution, which in consequence, leads 261 to the incorporation of a small amount of monomers of the first network into the second network by 262 the two-step sequential polymerization, resulting in the formation of poly(AAm-co-AMPS) in the 2nd 263 264 network. Although the concentration of AMPS monomer (< 1 mM) and the molar ratio of AMPS to AAm (< 1/1000 M/M) are very low, this incorporation of unreacted 1st network monomers in the 265 second network leads to an increase of true charge density C_GQ from 0,28 of pure PAAm to 3,09 mM 266 267 at the surface of the DN hydrogel. Further, the increase of C_{GQ} was even higher than expected, which 268 could be related to the incorporation of unreacted oligomers or sols in the 2nd network. These 269 concentrations at first seem negligible. However, it was shown that such low charge densities lead to 270 the adhesion of molecules²⁴. We demonstrated that it is possible to remove the residual AMPS 271 monomer and synthesis DN hydrogels with a PAAm hydrogel layer by first, an additional washing step of the PAMPS hydrogel after the 1st network polymerization as performed with the PAMPS-w hydrogel. 272 273 Second, the immersion of the as-prepared PAMPS hydrogel in the 2nd network precursor solution at a 274 volume ratio (V_r) of less than 0,001 has a similar effect to the washing but would waste a lot of reagent 275 solution. Further, it is possible to regulate the charge density at the surface of the DN hydrogel while maintaining the swelling ratio and bulk elastic modulus constant by adding a small amount of AMPS 276 $(C_{AMPS, R} < 1 \text{ mM or } C_{AMPS, R}/C_{AAm} < 1/1000)$ in the 2nd network. Such separable modulations of surface 277 278 charge density and elastic modulus should greatly merit the understanding of soft interface interaction 279 between hydrogels and cells.

Supporting Information Available: Contains experimental details, figures on additionalmeasurements, and a summary data table.

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