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Citation

Jeuken, L. J. C., Orrit, M. A. G. J., & Canters, G. W. (2022). Single-molecule fluorescence in redox chemistry. *Current Opinion In Electrochemistry*, 37. doi:10.1016/j.coelec.2022.101196

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3563026>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Review Article

Single-molecule fluorescence in redox chemistry

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Abstract

Optical studies of redox reactions are relatively non-invasive and can be performed in solution or on surfaces. These advantages are paired with advances in single-molecule and super-resolution methods. However, in electrochemistry, analysis is complicated by surface effects such as local heterogeneity in structure and chemistry, affecting redox thermodynamics and kinetics as well as the fluorescent properties of the dyes. We summarize single-molecule work done in our groups, in particular on single protein molecules, and discuss perspectives for future developments.

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Current Opinion in Electrochemistry 2023, 37:101196

This review comes from a themed issue on **Physical and Nanoelectrochemistry** (2023)

Edited by **Jeffrey E. Dick**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 9 December 2022

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.coelec.2022.101196>

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Keywords

Single molecules, Fluorescence, Fluorogenic reactions, Redox reactions, Electrochemistry, Oxidation potential, Metallo-proteins, Azurin, Redox indicator, Methylene blue, Electron transfer, FRET, Labeled protein, Heterogeneity.

Introduction

The kinetics of most redox reactions are dependent on the dynamic interactions between two redox compounds or between an electrode and a redox compound. Grasping the complexity and the highly dynamical character of these interactions requires a full resolution of their heterogeneity in space and time. Steady progress in single-molecule experimentation has brought us nearer to the tantalizing goal of resolving electron transfer reactions in space and time. Processes such as diffusion, mobility and interactions of (macro)molecules, their chemical and mechanical reactivity and the

influence of confinement, are mapped in ever increasing detail. Much information about redox reactions at the nanoscale has been provided by electrical and mechanical measurements with scanning probes and nanopores [1,2]. In this perspective, we focus on experiments done in far-field optical microscopy and spectroscopy [3–5]. They may be considered within the wider context of redox reactions. Single-molecule redox chemistry has been pursued using a variety of approaches and techniques, including electrochemistry, and after a brief introduction, we focus on some recent results obtained by fluorescence methods.

Single-molecule electrochemistry

A direct measurement of Faradaic electron transfer using electrochemistry is ultimately limited by the sensitivity of the amplifier or potentiostat. It has been estimated that quantification of electron transfer at the electrode surface is limited by electronic shot noise and requires the cumulative counting of at least 2000 electrons [6], prohibiting the electrochemical measurement of a single electron transfer step. A time resolution of 1 s for 2000 electrons limits the current sensitivity to 0.3 fA. Lemay and colleagues set an impressive benchmark in 2008 using lithography to fabricate sub-micron electrodes ($100 \times 100 \text{ nm}^2$). They measured an electrocatalytic proton reduction current of 22 fA by [NiFe]-hydrogenases using slow cyclic voltammetry (1.5 mV/s) [7]. Although hydrogenases are among the most active redox enzymes, with turnover rates of up to 9000 s^{-1} , the authors estimated that 22 fA still corresponds to the activity of 8–46 enzymes on the electrode. In other words, to measure single-molecule electrocatalysis, turnover rates well over $10,000 \text{ s}^{-1}$ would be required, which are rarely encountered. Since publication of their report, several papers have reported single-molecule catalysis detected by nano-impact. In this approach, the adsorption of a catalyst on an electrode is monitored amperometrically, i.e., through the small current spikes caused by impact of individual catalyst particles. Vannoy et al. [8] reviewed several reports of such measurements and noted that in each case the observed catalytic turnover rates were several orders higher than found in ensemble measurements. They concluded that validation of these enhanced catalytic rates would require other independent methods.

The above detection limit only applies to direct measurements of an electrochemical current. If an intense

stream of particles can be influenced by single redox events, such events can be detected with much higher sensitivity, thanks to the inherent amplification provided by the intense particle stream. This idea can be applied with electrons in scanning tunnelling microscopes [9] and other nanojunctions [10], with field-effect transistors [11], with ions flowing through nano-fluidic compartments [12] or nanopores [13], or with photons [14] reporting on the redox state of a suitable emitter. Here, we focus on this latter scheme applied through optical single-molecule signals. In applications of single-molecule optical microscopy to the study of redox reactions, we briefly describe the different solutions which have been shown to address two main experimental challenges: how to isolate single molecules experimentally and how to detect single redox events.

Experimental access to single molecules

How to isolate single molecules

To obtain optical access to single molecules experimentally, the illuminated detection volume must be limited, and a suitable optical signal must be isolated, usually through spectral resonance, from the background. In this article, we restrict ourselves to fluorescence, the most current optical technique in single-molecule optics. Single molecules can be spatially resolved in an optical microscope as soon as their density is so low that their point-spread functions do not overlap. Moreover, because acquisition times can be as long as minutes or hours, the molecules often are immobilized in the sample. Redox compounds can be immobilized directly on solid substrates possibly serving as electrodes, either through direct physisorption on a bare surface [15–17] or on self-assembled monolayers (SAMs) [18,19]. Alternatively, redox compounds can be immobilized in hydrogels [20], e.g., agarose [21], via covalent or transient tethers or linkers [22–27], on top of lipid bilayers on glass [28] or within liposomes [29–31]. Alternatively to immobilisation, Brownian motion can be actively compensated, by electrokinetic actuation [20,32] or by direct feedback on the sample stage [33]. Finally, molecules can be trapped in zero-mode wave guides [34], nanopores and nanochannels [35] or bipolar nanocells [36]. After isolating fluorescent emitters in space, their emission can be recorded by epifluorescent microscopy [29], TIRF [37] or confocal microscopy [24,38]. For the analysis of redox processes at long time scales, immobilisation on solid surfaces is often the most practical solution providing a fair balance between ease and experimental flexibility.

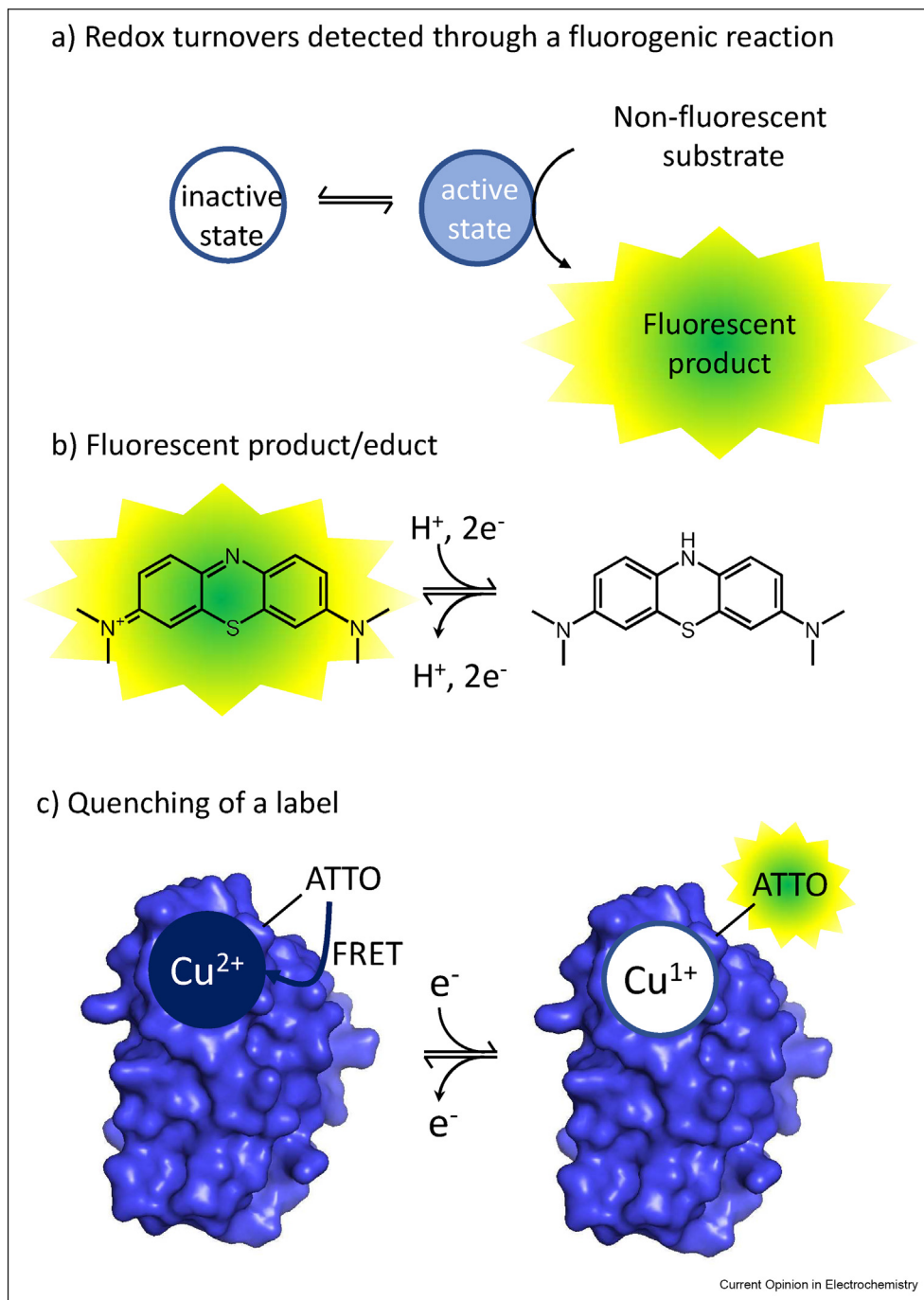
How to monitor the redox state through fluorescence

Distinguishing redox events of a single molecule requires identifying the transitions between two redox states. This requires the emission of many photons, of which, in customary experimental configurations, only a small fraction (usually, a few percent at best) are effectively detected. If the stream of detected photons

changes according to the redox state of the object under study, one can identify change points in a time trace of intensity, spectrum, lifetime, or any other fluorescence observable. Such change points thus report on single redox turnover events. Monitoring changes in redox state requires many more photons than are needed for just detecting single molecules in the sample. Photostability of the fluorescent emitters is therefore an issue, unless the redox reaction itself is able to produce several fluorescent molecules in a so-called fluorogenic reaction, each of which may emit many photons before bleaching. With a fluorescence lifetime of 10 ns, a time resolution of 10 ms, and a detection quantum yield of 1%, a single molecule under continuous illumination generates up to 10^4 detected photons per data point, a signal strong enough for accurate recordings of redox time traces with single-channel photodetectors and cameras. As fluorescence can be observed against a nearly dark background, a difference in fluorescence intensity can be readily measured at the single-molecule level.

The challenge here, however, is to find a spectroscopic observable reporting on the redox state of the single molecule under study. Three classes of solutions have been proposed so far in single-molecule fluorescence studies, which are schematically illustrated in Figure 1. One typical case is illustrated in Figure 1a, in which one of the reactants of a reaction is coupled to a so-called fluorogenic reaction, upon which a fluorescent product is generated [39,40]. In this first scheme, for which we are not aware of any published example of single-molecule redox conversion, a catalyst or active site could switch between two redox states, one of which would be inactive and the other active, i.e., it would give rise to a stream of fluorescent products, themselves visualized by fluorescence. Thus fluorescence would report on the redox state of the catalyst. In a second class, a fluorescent species is one of the compounds involved in the redox reaction(s) (Figure 1b). In an early example, the redox state of a flavin co-factor (FAD) of cholesterol oxidase was monitored during turn-over, the fluorescence reporting on the redox state of flavin [41]. Another possibility is a change of the fluorescence properties of the reactant itself, for example the redox indicator methylene blue [38,42,43]. The third class of experiments involves a fluorescent label, attached in the vicinity of the reaction centre whose optical properties are affected by its redox state (Figure 1c) [19,20,24,26,44]. In that case, the label does not directly participate in the redox reaction, it merely reports on it by interacting with one of the reactants or products. A common interaction involves quenching of the label's fluorescence by energy transfer to one of the redox states, whereas quenching by the other state does not occur, or is significantly weaker. The latter approach is particularly attractive for redox proteins, because a wide variety of fluorescent dyes can be relatively easily conjugated to the proteins at *specific locations* without disrupting the overall properties of the

Figure 1



Three possible examples of fluorescence monitoring of a redox reaction. (a) The interconversion of an inactive state of a catalyst to an active state is monitored by following the catalytic conversion of a non-fluorescent substrate to a fluorescent product. If the conversion of the inactive to the active catalyst would be due to a single redox reaction, these methods could in principle be used to study a single electron transfer step. However, we are not aware of any example in which this method is used to study a single redox conversion of the catalyst. (b) One of the terms of the redox reaction, the educt or product, is fluorescent; (c) An auxiliary label is quenched by one of the terms of the redox reaction. (b) and (c) are illustrated in the text by methylene blue and labelled azurin, respectively.

redox sites. The particular case of azurin is discussed in detail in section Fluorescently labelled azurin. Table 1 presents a few examples of fluorescent systems reporting on various reactions, most of them of the redox type, and many of them at the single-molecule level.

In the following, two examples will be discussed in more detail. The first one deals with methylene blue, a dye whose fluorescence depends on its redox state. Methylene blue fluorescence is very weak, but can be strongly enhanced by immobilizing the dye molecule in close proximity to a gold nanorod's tip, in its optical near field. The second example is presented by a non-fluorescent metalloprotein, azurin, whose redox state was monitored indirectly by conjugation to a fluorescent dye. These two examples can be considered as archetypes of the latter two classes of possible methods mentioned previously (Figure 1b and c).

Two case studies

Methylene blue

Methylene blue is a redox indicator, which changes from a strongly blue-coloured form in its oxidized state to the colourless leuco form in its reduced state. Although the change in absorption is spectacular in large ensembles of molecules, the absorption of a single methylene blue molecule is too weak to measure directly, and a fluorescence assay is needed. Unfortunately, the fluorescence yield of methylene blue is a few percent, which makes it difficult to detect the fluorescence of a single molecule, and even harder to measure fluorescence changes due to redox reactions. Following an earlier proposal to monitor the redox state of a fluorescent molecule [43], plasmonic enhancement of fluorescence was utilized in Ref. [42] to record redox time traces of single methylene blue molecules, which terminated when the dye photo-bleached. A relatively moderate fluorescence enhancement by the nearby tip of a single nanorod (by about 100 times) was achieved by immobilising methylene blue close to gold nanorods with a plasmon resonance overlapping significantly with its fluorescence spectrum. In this manner, long fluorescence time traces were recorded with sufficient signal-to-noise ratio to determine bright and dark times corresponding to oxidized and reduced states, respectively. Redox switching of methylene blue was monitored after reacting with an electron mediator, phenazine ethosulfate (PES), whose redox state in turn was controlled electrochemically using a nearby gold electrode. It was thus possible to determine the oxidation potential for a small number of single methylene blue molecules, and this potential was found to depend significantly on the particular molecule under study (Figure 2). Those variations were assigned to the particular microenvironment of each molecule and to the surrounding charge distribution, which affected the respective stabilities of the two redox forms. These

experiments also demonstrated a small effect of the laser illumination on the redox properties of the fluorescent molecule. This influence was assigned to an increase in oxidation potential (E^0) under optical excitation, resulting in an apparent rise in E^0 under high excitation intensity.

The main weakness of this work was the very small number of molecules studied. Indeed, to ensure the single-molecule regime was reached, it was necessary to reduce the number of molecules per nanorod to much less than one on average, and it was very unlikely to find an isolated methylene blue molecule at the proper distance from a single gold nanorod. Hundreds of nanorods had to be identified and studied to determine whether a proper dye molecule was at the right distance and position. Consequently, once the dye molecule was bleached, the associated rod was lost for further studies. Future work on this or similar systems would benefit from transient binding of the redox molecule. Methylene blue molecules or other dyes would be conjugated, e.g., to single DNA oligomers, which could transiently hybridize to fixed complementary strands immobilized in the near field of the gold nanorod, as illustrated recently with a non-redox active near-infrared dye [23]. This scheme has the advantage that the dye can be renewed after bleaching, while the same active spot at a close distance from the gold nanorod is kept for further hybridization events.

Fluorescently labelled azurin

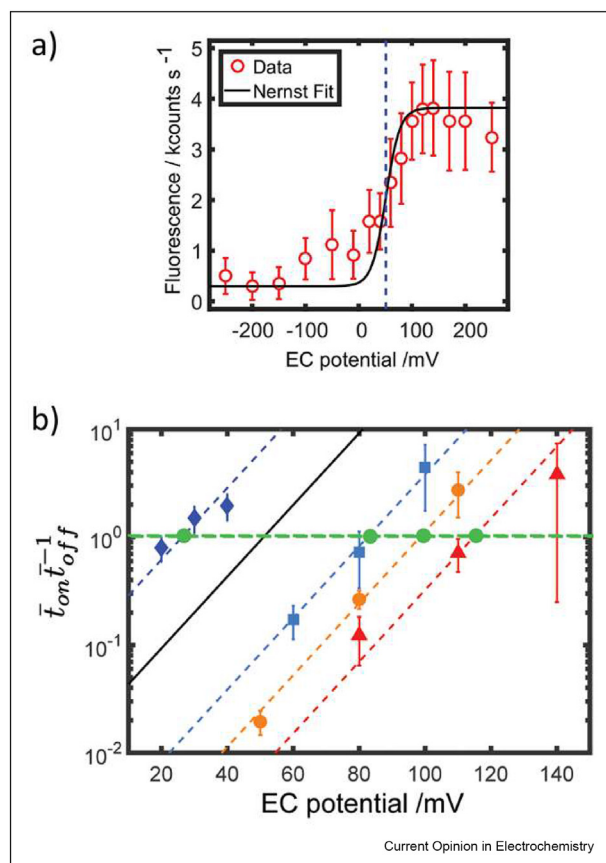
The second example relates to the non-fluorescent small blue copper protein azurin from *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* [22,24,44]. In its oxidized form, the copper site has a strong absorption band in the red giving the protein a beautiful blue appearance. When the protein is labelled with a fluorescent dye whose emission overlaps with the copper site's absorption, Förster resonance energy transfer (FRET) from the dye to the copper site will quench the dye fluorescence. In its reduced form, azurin is colourless and the dye now emits fluorescence unhindered. Hence, the fluorescence intensity or lifetime of an appropriately labelled azurin molecule directly reports on the oxidation state of its copper site. Under certain conditions, reversible electron transfer from the dye to the oxidized copper site can also occur [45]. Therefore, the distance between label and copper site should be chosen small enough for FRET, but large enough to prevent photo-induced electron transfer and the ensuing fluorescence quenching. This was achieved by labelling a Cy5 or ATTO647N to a unique cysteine engineered on the surface of azurin with site-directed mutagenesis (e.g., K27C or N42C). We have previously reported single-molecule measurements of azurin in solution by means of fluorescence correlation spectroscopy (FCS) [44]. Analysis of the redox state was performed by fluorescence intensity distribution analysis (FIDA),

Table 1

Examples of reactions that can (or could) provide a fluorescence readout of the redox state of single molecules.

Reaction detected	Dye/molecule name	ex/em (nm)	Reference	Comments
Oxidation and reduction of the fluorescent dye	Cresyl violet	598/621	[38,43]	Reducing the fluorescent dye Cresyl violet ($E^{0'} \approx -0.34$ V vs Ag/AgCl) creates a weakly-fluorescent compound
	Methylene blue (MB)	~665/~680	[42]	Oxidized MB is fluorescent, reduced leuco MB is non-fluorescent
	Resorufin	571/584	[51]	Reduction of the non-fluorescent resazurin results in the fluorescent resorufin
	Alexa Fluor 647	650/665	[37]	Proton-coupled reduction of Alexa Fluor 647 leads to a non-fluorescent product
Natural biological co-factors	NADH	~340/~460	[52]	NADH is fluorescent, but the oxidized NAD^+ is not
	Flavins	~370/~518 ~450/~518 (Riboflavin)	[41,52]	Oxidized flavin is fluorescent, reduced flavin is non-fluorescent (the hydroquinone is weakly fluorescent)
Oxidation of a quenching moiety	3'-(p-aminophenyl) fluorescein (APF)	492/514	[53]	Fluorescein is quenched by a p-aminophenyl. Illumination induces a one-electron oxidation of the p-aminophenyl group, restoring fluorescence.
	$\text{H}_2\text{B-PMHC}$ (BODIPY)	500/530	[54]	BODIPY is quenched by a topopherol group. Oxidation of the topopherol-quenching group restores BODIPY fluorescence
Measuring products of redox reactions	Fluorescein	480/515	[55]	Electrochemical reduction of water is measured by pH changes, changing fluorescence intensity of the pH-sensitive dye, fluorescein.
Non-redox fluorogenic reaction	N-(1-nonyldecyl)-N'-(p-aminophenyl) perylene 3,4,9,10-tetracarboxyl bisimide (NDAPP)	~522/~533	[56]	The fluorescent dye (perylene) is quenched by a p-aminophenyl group. Upon protonation (or metal binding) of the quenching group, fluorescence is restored.
	Molecular 'beacon' with fluorophore FITC and quencher DABCYL	490/520	[57]	The fluorophore and quencher are connected via a short peptide. Fluorescence is restored upon cleavage of the peptide linker.
	Bridged Carboxy-Fluorescein BCECF-AM	490/520	[39]	A chemically modified form of the fluorescent dye BCECF. After enzymatic conversion, BCECF and its fluorescence are restored.

Figure 2



a) Ensemble fluorescence response of 260 unenhanced methylene blue molecules to the electrochemical potential, showing the controlled switching from the reduced state at low potentials to the oxidized state at high potentials. The black curve is a fit using the Nernst equation and the dashed line illustrates the obtained oxidation potential (51 ± 4 mV). **b)** The ratio of the average lifetimes in the oxidized ($\bar{t}_{on}$) and reduced ($\bar{t}_{off}$) state of the methylene blue ($\bar{t}_{on}/\bar{t}_{off}$) is plotted as a function of the potential for four single, surface-immobilised methylene blue molecules for which the fluorescence is plasmonically enhanced using nearby gold nanorods. The EC potential is set by the electron mediator phenazine ethosulphate (PES), whose redox potential is controlled electrochemically *via* nearby gold electrodes. Different symbols and colours represent different single molecules. The diagonal dashed lines are fits of these data using the Nernst equation to extract the oxidation potential E_0 for each molecule, while the black solid line corresponds to the ensemble value of the oxidation potential extracted from data in Figure a). The green dashed line represents $\bar{t}_{on} = \bar{t}_{off}$, when methylene blue spends half its time oxidised and the other half reduced. This half-wave potential thus equals the oxidation potential, E^0 , of the four single methylene blue molecules under study (indicated by green dots). Figure based on Figures 2b and 4b of ref. [42], reproduced with permission.

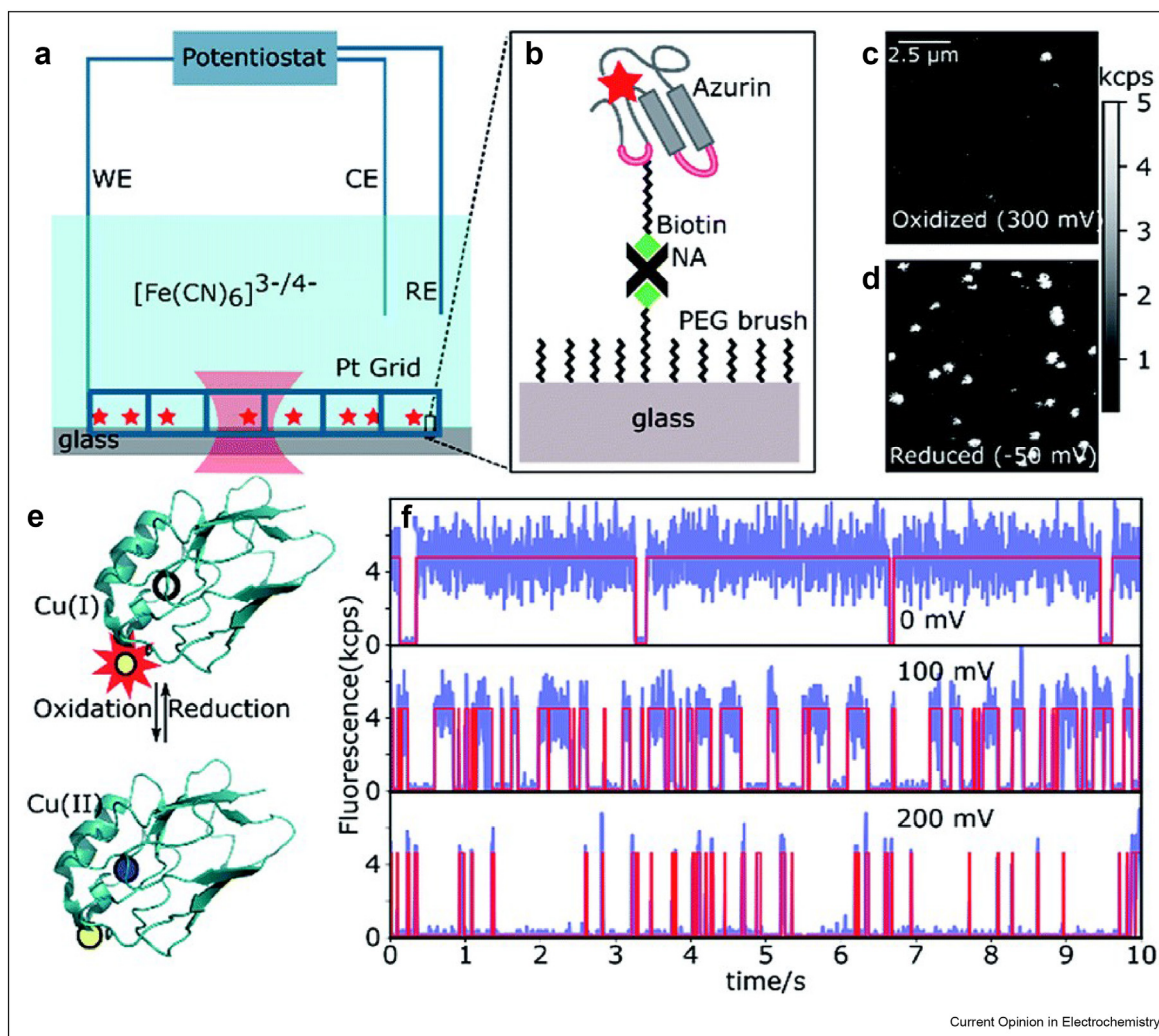
which reports on the redox state of the copper site in azurin. Although they could distinguish oxidised and reduced azurin states, FCS and FIDA provided little data on the actual redox switching. In order to monitor changes in redox state of single molecules, it was thus necessary to isolate the redox compounds for extended

periods of time, by confining the fluorescent molecules in a small volume or by sparsely immobilizing them on an electrode surface.

In redox studies of single proteins, the dye-protein couple and the attachment site have to be considered carefully. In early experiments with Cy5-azurin, the molecules were immobilized on a glass cover slip and oxidised and reduced with chemical agents [22,44]. Fluorescence was significantly quenched in the oxidised Cy5-azurin and not in the reduced Cy5-azurin and thus reversible oxidation and reduction of single azurins could be monitored with fluorescence microscopy, until the Cy5 dye photobleached [44]. Unexpectedly, however, Cy5-(K27C)-azurin displayed two species with different fluorescence intensities, both in their oxidised and reduced states. Similarly, two species were observed for the redox inactive and colourless Zn-azurin, in which the copper ion is replaced by a zinc. As these two species were not observed for the free dye, the two intensities were attributed to two specific conformations of the Cy5 label at the K27C position of azurin, independent of its redox state. Conformational flexibility of the dye at the protein surface should thus be considered when choosing an appropriate conjugation site and dye. Later, Cy5-azurin was immobilized on the working electrode of a three-electrode electrochemical cell and monitored optically. The redox state of azurin was changed by direct electron exchange with a gold electrode coated with a SAM of alkanethiol, which for a proper alkane length (less than 10 carbons) enables electrochemical oxidation and reduction of immobilized azurin [46]. Ensemble experiments showed a good correspondence between the electrochemical and fluorescence signals [19], taking into account quenching of the Cy5 by gold [24].

More recent studies on ATTO647N–N42C-azurin (and of an ATTO655-Azurin variant) made sure that only a single fluorescent species is observed in the oxidised state [22]. This enabled a fluorescence study of ATTO647N–N42C-azurin tethered to glass *via* a long (20 nm) linker, whereas redox switching was controlled by ferri/ferrocyanide in solution (Figure 3). The redox couple ferri/ferrocyanide was controlled electrochemically *via* a Pt electrode positioned close to the glass surface. A continuous range of potentials was applied, effectively providing a potentiometric titration monitored at the single-protein level. Detailed analysis of 145 individual ATTO647N–N42C-azurin molecules indicated a distribution in reduction potentials. The reduction potentials followed a Gaussian-like distribution with a FWHM of 45 mV. Importantly, the distribution of oxidation potentials is significantly narrower than found in previous analysis of fluorescently labelled azurins adsorbed on alkanethiol SAMs [19,47] suggesting that flexibility of the 20-nm long tether averaged out local surface charge inhomogeneities to a large extent. Yet,

Figure 3



Single azurin imaging and intensity traces at different potentials. (a) Scheme of the electrochemical system with confocal laser spot (red waist). The electrochemical setup consists of a potentiostat, a platinum grid as working electrode (WE), a platinum coil as counter electrode (CE), and an SCE as the reference electrode (RE). (b) Schematic of the immobilization of azurin on a PEG-passivated glass surface through NeutrAvidin–biotin binding. (c and d) Confocal images of the same area of a functionalized glass slide at oxidizing (C, 300 mV) and reducing (D, -50 mV) potential, respectively. (e) Azurin structure with reduced Cu (top, empty dot) and oxidized Cu (bottom, blue dot) and the dye (yellow) in the associated state (bright, symbolized by the red star, at the top quenched at the bottom). (f) Three time traces of the same single azurin molecule at 0 mV, 100 mV and 200 mV (binning time 5 ms). Note the variations in the average durations of bright and dark times at different potentials. Figure reproduced from Ref. [22] with permission from the Royal Society of Chemistry.

this dispersion of oxidation potentials was still well beyond that expected for statistical error. Further analysis of 13 molecules of ATTO647N–N42C-azurin over time periods up to thousands of seconds further demonstrated dynamic heterogeneity of reduced and oxidised dwell times. This heterogeneity appears as correlated successions of (bright or dark) times longer or shorter than their average. Dynamical heterogeneity, which has been observed earlier in single-enzyme kinetics [39,48], is assigned to multiple conformational states of the same single molecule, which may not only

influence the reaction rates, but potentially also the oxidation potential of the single molecule. Long-lived structural heterogeneity may also cause variations in association rates between the ferri/ferrocyanide and azurin.

Perspectives

The last decade has seen the first experiments combining redox chemistry with single molecules, typically immobilized on a surface. But what can we expect from these single-molecule experiments?

Because of the complexity and heterogeneity of surfaces, electron transfer processes and redox properties of individual (macro)molecules are subject to heterogeneity in space and time, meaning that reaction parameters such as oxidation potentials, potential barriers, reorganization energies, etc. will fluctuate from molecule to molecule and will also fluctuate as a function of time for the same single molecule. Studying these distributions, we can hope for a better understanding and control of these reactions.

Moreover, because they do not need synchronization of many individual molecules, experiments on a single molecule can reveal mechanistic details that are hidden in ensemble-averaged experiments, such as the sequences of intermediate states occupied in a complex reaction, or predecessor-successor relations between these states, or the potential energy landscape with favoured reaction pathways.

The main access to the redox states of a molecule so far has been fluorescence. A first access applied earlier in catalysis makes use of fluorogenic reactions, which, e. g., produce a fluorescent molecule from a non-fluorescent reactant. The intensity of fluorescence therefore reports on the activity of the reactive site. A more direct method, illustrated here with methylene blue, detects the redox state of the molecule of interest through its fluorescence directly. When one of the redox states absorbs differently from the other, but is not fluorescent, quenching of a nearby fluorescent dye can be used to detect redox reactions. This process has been illustrated here by the case of azurin, but could be extended to multicentre enzymes, for example those involved in mitochondrial or photosynthetic respiratory cycles. Different redox sites could be labelled by specific dyes to follow the different reactions and their interactions.

Finally, optical single-molecule methods are no longer limited to fluorescence. Scattering experiments either in bright field (iSCAT) [49] or by photothermal contrast [50], could be adapted to redox reactions if the absorption or polarizability of the molecule or nanoparticle under study changes under the influence of the reaction. In view of our urgent need for efficient energy conversion and thus for better understanding and control of electrochemical reactions, we can expect much more single-entity experiments and applications in the future.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

Acknowledgements

The experiments discussed here succeeded thanks to the hard work of many PhD students and postdoctoral fellows over many years. We are particularly grateful to Drs. Weichun Zhang, Biswajit Pradhan, and Martín Caldarola. We thank Dr. Claudio Saracini, Naples, for stimulating discussions on the subject of multicentre respiratory enzymes. Continuing financial support by NWO is gratefully acknowledged.

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- of outstanding interest

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