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Waveguide superconducting single-photon detectors for integrated quantum photonic circuits

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The combination of single-photon sources, passive optical circuits, and single-photon detectors enables complex and scalable quantum photonic integrated circuits, for application in linear-optics quantum computing and quantum communications. Here, we demonstrate a key component of such a circuit, a waveguide single-photon detector. Our detectors, based on superconducting nanowires on GaAs ridge waveguides, provide high efficiency (~20%) at telecom wavelengths, high timing accuracy (~60 ps), and response time in the ns range and are fully compatible with the integration of single-photon sources, passive networks, and modulators.

Our WSPDs are based on the principle of photon-induced hot-spot creation in ultranarrow superconducting NbN wires, which is also used in nanowire superconducting single-photon detectors (SSPDs) and can provide ultrahigh sensitivity at telecommunication wavelengths, high counting rates, broad spectral response, and high temporal resolution due to low jitter values. In our design (see Fig. 1), the wires are deposited and patterned on top of a GaAs ridge waveguide, in order to sense the evanescent field on the surface. Four NbN nanowires (4 nm-thick, 100 nm wide, and spaced by 150 nm) are placed on top of a GaAs (300 nm)/Al0.75Ga0.25As waveguide, and a 1.85 μm-wide, 250 nm-deep ridge is etched to provide 2D confinement. We assume that a 100 nm-thick SiOx layer is left on top of the wires as a residue of the hydrogen silsesquioxane (HSQ) mask used for...
patterning the wires. The dimensions of the waveguide have been optimized to obtain maximum absorption by the NbN wires while leaving a 0.5 μm alignment margin between the wires and the side of the ridge. The electric field amplitude and polarization for the fundamental mode, calculated using a finite-element mode solver (COMSOL Multiphysics), is shown in Fig. 1(b) for λ = 1300 nm. For this quasi-transverse-electric (TE) mode, we calculate a modal absorption coefficient of x_{abs} = 451 cm^{-1} (assuming a refractive index of 5.23–5.82i (Ref. 10) for NbN), corresponding to 90% (99%) absorptance after 51 μm (102 μm) propagation length. This very high and broadband absorptance in an ultrathin wire is unique to waveguide geometries, which allow an interaction length limited only by extrinsic waveguide losses. Since the NbN wires produce a very small perturbation to the guided mode, the impendence mismatch at the interface between the passive waveguide without wires and the detecting section is negligible (calculated modal reflectivity of 5.84 × 10^{-5}%), allowing very efficient coupling to the detector. We note that this design with a TE-polarized, tightly confined mode is optimized for on-chip applications with integrated single-photon sources (quantum dots in waveguides), which emit in the TE polarization. In contrast, transverse magnetic (TM) polarized modes have a complex spatial profile, which makes the fiber coupling inefficient. By increasing the waveguide thickness by 50 nm, well-confined TM modes with high modal absorptance coefficients > 500 cm^{-1} can be obtained. The absorptance of both TE and TM light would then approach 100%, resulting in a polarization-independent quantum efficiency (QE).

Nanowire WSPDs were fabricated on top of a GaAs (300 nm)/Al_{0.7}Ga_{0.25}As (1.5 μm) heterostructure grown by molecular beam epitaxy on an undoped GaAs (001) substrate. A 4.3 nm-thick NbN layer was deposited by dc reactive magnetron sputtering of a Nb target in a N_{2}/Ar plasma at 350 °C, with deposition parameters optimized for GaAs substrates, resulting in a critical temperature T_c = 10.0 K, and a transition width ΔT_c = 650 mK. WSPDs were then fabricated using four steps of direct-writing 100 kV electron beam lithography (EBL). In the first step, Ti(10 nm)/Au(60 nm) contact pads (patterned as a 50 Ω coplanar transmission line) and alignment markers are defined by lift-off using a PMMA mask (Fig. 2(a)). In the second step, the meander pattern is defined on a 180 nm thick (HSQ) mask and then transferred to the NbN film with a (CHF_{3}+SF_{6}+Ar) reactive ion etching (RIE). Fig. 2(b) shows a scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image of an etched wire. The meandered NbN nanowire (100 nm width, 250 nm pitch, and 30-100 μm length), still covered with the HSQ mask, is very regular with a width uniformity of about 5%. In the third step, an HSQ-mask for the waveguide patterning is defined by carefully realigning this layer with the previous one. This layer also protects the Ti/Au pads against the subsequent reactive etching process. Fig. 2(c) shows an atomic force microscopy (AFM) image of the waveguide etch mask aligned to the wires, showing realignment accuracy better than 100 nm (Fig. 2(d)). Successively, 250 nm of the underlying GaAs layer is etched by a Cl_{2}+Ar ECR (electron cyclotron resonance) RIE. Finally, in order to allow the electrical wiring to the TiAu pads, vias through the remaining HSQ-mask are opened using a PMMA mask and RIE in a CHF_{3} plasma.
and $R = 50 \, \Omega$ is the load resistance. Considering that it takes a time $\approx 3 \tau$ to recover 95% of the bias current after detection, we estimate a maximum counting rate close to 100 MHz. By illuminating the device with a pulsed diode laser, a total jitter of 73 ps was measured on the WSPD output pulse, corresponding to a 61 ps intrinsic detector jitter after correcting for the 40 ps jitter from the laser pulse.

The measured QE (1300 nm, TE polarization) is plotted in Fig. 4 (left axis) as a function of the normalized bias current $I_b/I_c$. The system quantum efficiency (SQE, open symbols), defined as the average number of counts divided by the average photon number in the fiber at the input of the cryostat, reaches 3.4% for a 50 μm-long device. For determining the number of photons coupled into the waveguide, transmission measurements were performed with a tunable laser on a sample containing 3 mm-long ridge waveguides, but without NbN wires and contact pads. From the measured Fabry-Perot fringes, and particularly from the maximum and minimum transmission (in TE polarization), $T_{\max} = 6.1\%$ and $T_{\min} = 1.8\%$, we deduce that the propagation loss over a 3 mm waveguide length is negligible. Assuming symmetric input/output coupling and using the standard expression for the Fabry-Perot transmission, we derive a coupling efficiency (from fiber input) of 17.4%. The corresponding device quantum efficiency (DQE), defined with respect to the number of photons coupled to the waveguide, is plotted as closed symbols in Fig. 4 and reaches 19.7%. This value is still lower than the calculated absorbance (90% in the 50 μm-long WSPD), which we mainly attribute to a limited internal quantum efficiency (detection probability upon absorption of a photon), and further improvements of film quality and wire etching process may result in notably improved values. Another potential cause for limited efficiency may be extrinsic loss (e.g., scattering) due to the nanowires, which is how the nanowires, which is how integrated photon-correlation devices and photon-number-resolving detectors are straightforward to realize by integrating several wires on the same waveguide. Furthermore, this technology is fully compatible with the fabrication of passive quantum circuits on GaAs waveguides, and with single-photon sources based on InAs quantum dots in waveguides, and, therefore, opens the way to fully integrated quantum photonic circuits including sources and detectors.

Note added in proof: Two alternative approaches to waveguide single-photon detection, based on transition edge sensors and on superconducting nanowires on Si/SiO$_2$ waveguides, have been reported during the submission process of this manuscript.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated integrated waveguide single-photon detectors based on superconducting nanowires on GaAs ridge waveguides. They provide system (device) quantum efficiencies of 3.4% (≈20%) at 1300 nm, a timing resolution ~60 ps, and dead times of few ns. Further optimization of film deposition and device fabrication may result in efficiencies approaching 100% due to the high absorbance allowed by the waveguide geometry. Higher system QE and polarization-independence can be obtained by a waveguide design providing a more extended and symmetric mode profile and by integrating a tapered coupler. Integrated photon-correlation devices and photon-number-resolving detectors are straightforward to realize by integrating several wires on the same waveguide. Furthermore, this technology is fully compatible with the fabrication of passive quantum circuits on GaAs waveguides, and with single-photon sources based on InAs quantum dots in waveguides, and, therefore, opens the way to fully integrated quantum photonic circuits including sources and detectors.