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Quantitative measurement and visualization of biofilm O₂ consumption rates
in membrane filtration systems

J.S. Vrouwenvelder^{*1,2}, E.I.E.C. Prest^{1,3}, M. Kuhl^{4,5}, M.C.M. van Loosdrecht¹, M. Staal^{2,4}
¹Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands, ²KAUST, Saudi Arabia, ³Wetsus, The Netherlands, ⁴University of Copenhagen, Denmark, ⁵University of Technology Sydney, Australia

There is a strong need for techniques enabling direct assessment of biological activity of biofouling in membrane filtration systems. Here we present a new quantitative and non-destructive method for mapping O₂ dynamics in biofilms during biofouling studies in membrane fouling simulators (MFS). Transparent planar O₂ optodes in combination with a luminescence lifetime imaging system were used to map the two-dimensional distribution of O₂ concentrations and consumption rates inside the MFS. The O₂ distribution was indicative for biofilm development. Biofilm activity was characterized by imaging of O₂ consumption rates, where low and high activity areas could be clearly distinguished. The spatial development of O₂ consumption rates, flow channels and stagnant areas could be determined (Figures 1 and 2). This can be used for studies on concentration polarization, i.e. salt accumulation at the membrane surface resulting in increased salt passage and reduced water flux. The new optode-based O₂ imaging technique applied to MFS allows non-destructive and spatially resolved quantitative biological activity measurements for on-site biofouling diagnosis and laboratory studies. The following set of complementary tools is now available to study development and control of biofouling in membrane systems: (i) MFS, (ii) sensitive pressure drop measurement, (iii) magnetic resonance imaging, (iv) numerical modelling, and (v) biological activity measurement based on O₂ imaging methodology.

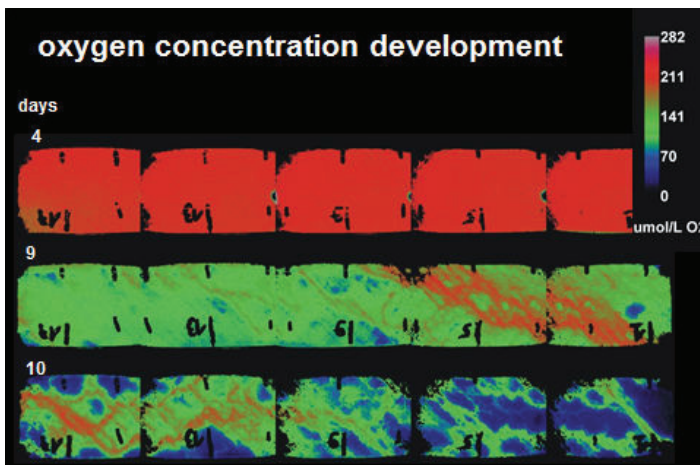


Figure 1: Spatio-temporal distribution of O₂ concentration (µmol O₂ /L) imaged over the monitor length at the optode surface, i.e. the base of the fouling layer. The figure shows the development of low O₂ concentration regions and flow channelling over time. The flow direction is from left to right.

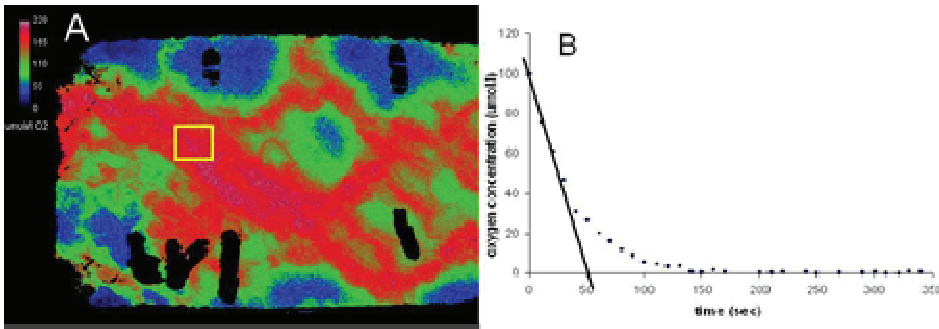


Figure 2. Procedure to determine O_2 consumption rates in the MFS. Oxygen images were taken every 10 s after the flow was stopped. An area of interest (AOI) was selected on the initial oxygen image (A) and the O_2 depletion over time was determined for the AOI (B). The O_2 consumption rate for particular AOIs was calculated from the initial slope of the O_2 depletion curve.

Keywords: biofouling, non-destructive biofouling diagnosis, biological activity measurement, concentration polarization