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An imaging technique for the strain-engineering of deformable electrodes

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Hydrogen is today mainly obtained by hydrocarbon steam reforming, which produces large CO₂ quantities. Because of the rising concern about greenhouse gas emissions, the widespread use of hydrogen as an energy carrier requires the development of a carbon-free production chain. In case it makes use of renewable electricity sources, hydrogen production by electrolysis may be the key to trigger the expansion of this promising sector. However, only a few percent of the total hydrogen production comes today from water electrolysis, mainly because of its cost, which is about four times higher than the cost of hydrogen obtained by steam reforming. Electrolysis requires an electrocatalyst, typically platinum, which is rare and expensive.

Electrolytic production of H₂ is thus handicapped by its dependence on platinum and by the adverse role played by the hydrogen bubbles produced at the electrode surface in the hydrogen production itself. It is therefore crucial, in order to minimize the cost and energy losses, to avoid materials like platinum as much as possible, and to limit the adverse effects of bubbles production.

It has already been demonstrated that elastic strains can modulate the electrocatalytic activity of metals [1-3], so that more abundant materials could be strained in order to compare with platinum in terms of electrocatalytic activity. The question of the optimal position in the 6-dimensional strain space is however open, and we propose an experimental approach based on an original imaging technique to address this issue.

[1] *Mavrikakis et al.* Phys. Rev. Lett. 81 (13), 1998.

[2] *Kibler et al.* Angew. Chem. Int. Ed. 44, 2005.

[3] *Martinez-Alonso et al.* PCCP 24, 2022.

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