1 Title

- 2 Room temperature sensing of volatile organic compounds using hybrid SnO nanoflower and Laser-
- 3 Induced Graphitic carbon devices

4 Authors

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9 Keywords

- 10 Room Temperature Volatile Organic Compound Sensing
- 11 Laser-Induced Graphene
- 12 Additive Manufacture
- 13 Resource Efficient Design
- Worker Safety
- Density Functional Theory

16 Highlights

- 17 Room temperature volatile organic compound sensing
 - Laser-induced graphitic carbon-nanomaterials hybrid devices
 - Volatile organic compound sensor produced through an additive manufacturing process
 - First demonstration of SnO-LIG chemiresistive sensor
 - Validation of sensing mechanism by density functional theory calculations

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23 Competing interest statement

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.

29 Graphical Abstract



31 Abstract

32 Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are a common risk to human health in industrial and domestic settings. VOCs are often present at concentrations that cannot be detected through human odor 33 34 perception. VOC sensors are, therefore, urgently needed for home and workplace environmental 35 monitoring, including wearable sensors for workers. However, current chemiresistive VOC sensors 36 typically require high-energy fabrication processes with large environmental footprints, significant 37 mass-loadings of critical raw materials and/or elevated operating temperatures, which hamper 38 widespread, sustainable deployment. We demonstrate a simple, low-energy hybrid fabrication route 39 for chemiresistive VOC sensors, comprising additively-produced laser-induced graphene (LIG) 40 electrodes on plastic substrates, decorated with SnO nanoflowers. The SnO nanoflowers were 41 synthesized below 100°C at ambient pressure and offer a low-energy alternative to conventional SnO₂ 42 or other metal-oxide nanoparticle devices. These chemiresistive sensors can detect methanol vapor 43 at room temperature (\sim 18°C) and typical humidity levels (\sim 55% RH), with a limit of detection 44 (170±40 ppm) below 8-hour worker safety exposure levels (200 ppm). The sensors also demonstrated stable DC resistance responses $\Delta R/R = 9\pm 2\%$ to 710 ppm of methanol for over 21 days in ambient 45 46 laboratory conditions. First principles density functional theory simulations are used to elucidate the origin of the performance of the LIG-SnO sensors. LIG-SnO hybrid sensors thus present a resource-47 efficient route to develop chemiresistive sensors for low-power applications, such as wearable worker 48 49 safety or Internet of Things edge-sensing.

51 Introduction

52 Many volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are released during industrial processes ranging from pharmaceutical manufacturing to automotive applications, as well as in domestic settings. They can 53 54 originate as by-products of combustion, fuel storage, cooking, or through outgassing from household 55 furnishings [1–7]. VOCs can also build up in enclosed spaces or areas with poor air exchange, resulting 56 in increased local concentration and associated cumulative exposure risk [8,9]. Often, these VOCs pose a significant health risk at concentrations below human perception, e.g., methanol 8-hour worker 57 58 safety threshold (200 ppm) vs. human odor detection (>10,000 ppm) [10-13]. Thus, reliable VOC 59 sensors are necessary for worker and domestic safety through integration with the Internet of Things, either as worker wearables or as part of sensor networks within a workplace or domestic setting. 60

61 However, conventional VOC sensors typically use costly semiconductor-manufactured 62 interdigitated metallic electrode platforms, requiring critical raw materials and increasing their environmental footprint [14]. Further, the sensitizing material typically requires high-temperature 63 64 processing steps to produce the correct phase of the metal oxide (MOX) materials and/or to calcinate 65 previously synthesized MOX nanoparticles [15,16]. Beyond that, they also often require elevated 66 operating temperatures (>300°C), which pose significant challenges for low-power, wearable sensors. 67 Therefore, there are three routes to reduce the lifetime energy cost of chemiresistive sensors: 1) the 68 elimination of semiconductor fabricated electrodes, 2) lower energy preparation routes for sensitizing materials, and 3) room temperature operation. 69

Semiconducting MOX sensors were initially demonstrated as thin films, although recent advances using nanoparticle morphologies have led to decreased operating temperatures and mass loadings [17,18]. The MOX sensitivity to VOCs derives from the semiconductor conductivity dependence on charge carrier density. When a VOC adsorbs onto the MOX, a charge transfer produces a measurable conductivity change. The mechanism used to describe this is based on early thin film MOX VOC sensors, which described both the direct charge exchange process and a catalytically enhanced oxidation process occurring at elevated temperatures (>400°C) [18,19]. In the oxidation process, adsorbed/ionosorbed oxygen molecules withdraw electrons from the p/n-type MOX resulting in an increase/decrease of conductivity and producing different anions (O_2^- , O^- , O^{2-}) depending on the temperature. These high-energy charged species may react with VOC molecules and release the withdrawn electrons back into the MOX, undoing their previous modulation, upon exposure to a VOC molecule.

82 A great variety of MOX materials have been investigated for their sensitivity and selectivity to given VOCs, arising from adsorption site nature and adsorption energies dependences. These include 83 84 n-type semiconducting MOXs, e.g., WO₃ [18], [20] ZnO [19], SnO₂ [20], TiO₂ [21], In₂O₃ [22][18] and also p-type: Co₃O₄ [23], CuO [24], Cr₂O₃ [25] and NiO [26]. To enhance their sensing performance 85 86 (sensitivity, selectivity, stability, and response/recovery time), several methods have been developed, 87 including: decoration with noble metal catalyst particles [15,27–29]; mixed-deposition of MOX 88 nanoparticles [26,30–34]; morphology changes, including miniaturization [25,35–37]; high-aspect-89 ratio structures[38–40]; and use of hollow spheres [41–43].

90 These optimization routes, and combinations thereof, have been widely discussed in the 91 literature [36,37,44-48]. Briefly, metal catalysts and MOX decoration can enhance reactant 92 adsorption and allow spill-over [49] onto the MOX surface or can open additional reaction routes [50]. 93 Morphological changes affect the sensor transduction behavior amplifying the charge accumulation 94 or depletion layers and amplifying or attenuating device resistance, respectively, due to increased 95 surface/volume ratios [37]. Similarly, p-n junction formation from MOX decoration can also contribute 96 to surface depletion layer formation locally around the junction, producing a conduction route more 97 strongly dependent on gas interaction [32].

98 However, such optimization routes typically require critical raw materials (e.g., Pt, Rh, Pd, Ti,
99 W) [14], exotic fabrication conditions, and an increase of the complexity of the particle formation
100 process without a significant reduction in device operating temperature. This yields sensor platforms

- 101 that require significant resources for fabrication and operation, which need to be reduced further if
- they are to be used extensively as part of the Internet of Things. A comparison of typical sensor

103 fabrication and operation conditions is presented in Table 1.

Sensor Type	Electrode	Support	Sensing Material Formation Temp. (>300°C)	Post calcination (>300°C)	Elevated Operational Temp. (>300°C)	Critical Raw Materials *	Ref
Thin Film	Pre-patterned Metal	Ceramic	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	[18,19,5 1–53]
Thick Film	Pre-patterned Metal	Quartz	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	[54–58]
Sintered Nanoparticles	Pre-patterned Metal	Ceramic	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	[15,27,5 9,60]
Self-assembled Nanoparticles	LIG Electrode	Polymer	No	No	No	No	This work

104 Table 1 Integration challenges for existing chemiresistive VOC sensing morphologies.

* Critical raw materials identified in Study on the EU's list of Critical Raw Materials (2020), e.g., Pt, Pd, Rh, In, Ti, W [14]

105 Semiconductor MOX nanoparticle investigations have typically favored n-type particles, in 106 part due to their greater enhancement in sensing performance with particle size reduction than p-107 type MOX [24]. However, p-type materials have recently been demonstrated to have lower optimal 108 operating temperatures than n-type MOX; this suggests their suitability for room temperature VOC 109 sensors [61,62], which would dramatically reduce their energy consumption and allow for human 110 wearable sensors. Further, p-type responsive sensors are invaluable for machine-learning-enabled e-111 nose sensor arrays, providing a discrete and opposite response polarity assisting in the fingerprinting 112 of analytes [63].

Laser-induced graphitic carbon (LIG) is an attractive candidate electrode material for replacing traditionally manufactured electrodes. Discovered in 2014, this laser graphitization method enables site-specific direct-write formation of highly porous, three-dimensional, conductive carbon electrodes on suitable polymer substrates [64]. LIG was initially formed from polyimide, a synthetic polymer, using a 10.6 μm CO₂ laser. The laser treatment locally increases the temperature and pressure of the 118 precursor polymer, producing the characteristic porous graphitic LIG material [65]. The complexity of 119 the formation process necessitates multifactor optimization routines due to the multiple interrelated 120 factors controlling morphology and behavior [66]. The resulting carbon material has shown great 121 potential for electrochemical sensing [67,68], and energy storage [69,70] and more recently for gas 122 sensing [71-74]. However, damaging/costly mechanical/silver-paint electrical contacts have been 123 necessary to utilize the resulting carbon material, until recent direct-write, back-contacting methods 124 were developed [70]. Subsequent works have demonstrated its formation from treated wood [75] 125 and food products [76]; as-harvested renewables, e.g., cork [69]; and biopolymers, e.g., chitosan [77]. 126 Further, its formation has been demonstrated using visible laser sources [78].

127 To date, LIG-based gas sensors have focused on NO₂ detection both as resource-efficient 128 contact electrodes [71,72] and as active material [73,74]. These works have investigated LIG natively 129 [74], and with MoS₂ functionalization [73], demonstrating impressive sensitivities and selectivities but 130 with slow room temperature response/recovery times, ranging from several minutes to several hours. 131 The response/recovery times become longer with the addition of humidity protection layers while 132 further decreasing particle size results in faster response times, but slower recovery times, associated 133 with strong binding to more numerous sites. These devices require the implementation of heating 134 elements, either external or native Joule heating to decrease response/recovery times towards real-135 time monitoring applications.

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139 Figure 1 Schematic showing response sensitivity dependence on device functionalization geometry (channel vs. gap).

140 While LIG can be used as the sensing element, due to its formation condition tunable active 141 sites, this sensor morphology should not be favored over interdigitated designs, where gas sensing is 142 mediated by the sensitizing material in the gap region. Conduction through the LIG channel, even functionalized with sensitizing agents, acts as a parallel conduction path with the majority of the 143 144 conduction mediated through the LIG bulk with a minor contribution from the surface/sensitizing layer, as shown in fig. 1a. Therefore, the effective modulation from gas species alters only the minor 145 contribution of the surface resistance, but R_{Total} ≈ R_{Bulk}. Even if large surface resistance modulation is 146 achieved, it would still be a minority contribution to the measurable total resistance. In contrast, 147 interdigitated geometries essentialize conduction through the sensitizing material in a series resistor 148 network yielding a proportionally larger change in the measurable total resistance, as $R_T \approx R_{Gap}$, as 149 150 shown in fig.1b.

151 Centering the device around the critical conduction channel results in enhanced responses, as 152 has been demonstrated in the initial works using MoS_2 in both LIG channel (0.8 % response to 1 ppm 153 of NO₂, 60°C) [74] and LIG gap-based devices (22.9% to 250 ppb of NO₂, room temperature) [71]. Further, LIG active material strongly cross-selects to humidity requiring the intervention of 154 155 hydrophobic layers to mitigate its deleterious effects in channel-type devices [74]. Similarly, the high 156 native selectivity of the LIG to NO₂ would be another undesirable cross-selectivity limiting functionalization towards other VOC analyte targets. Therefore, functionalized gap structures with LIG 157 158 support electrodes, allow for electrode resource reduction and higher sensitivity, without introducing 159 undesirable cross-selectivities.

160 These initial works on LIG-based sensors have focused on the use of MoS₂, however, 161 molybdenum is a critical raw material [14]. This is not in line with the intent of using LIG as a resource-162 efficient sensing platform. Therefore, alternatives should be sought, one particularly attractive option is tin monoxide (SnO). SnO, like graphene and MoS₂ is a 2D layered material, due to the Sn 5s lone pair 163 distorting its crystal structure [79,80] allowing for enhanced surface/volume ratios and accessible 5s 164 165 orbitals [81]. This, in addition to its p-type semiconducting nature due to Sn vacancies [80,82,83], and 166 its metastability up to moderate temperatures (370°C), make it an attractive candidate for room 167 temperature VOC sensing [84]. However, to date there have been limited investigations using SnO, 168 preferring instead SnO₂ due to its well-established synthesis route, despite its high-temperature 169 preparation and calcination process steps (400-800°C) [85]. Further SnO presents a viable route for 170 sensitivity enhancement via p-n junction surface depletion layers through controlled oxidation of SnO 171 (p-type) into SnO₂ (n-type).

While SnO₂ has received more research interest due to its early adoption as the preeminent gas sensor since the 1970s [20,54] there have been some more recent works exploring SnO as a gassensing material [62,86,87] and for Li-battery applications [88–90]. SnO has been prepared in several ways including evaporation/sputtering [38,84,91], carbothermal [92], hydrothermal [93–95], 176 sonothermal [96,97], microwave [98] and solution methods [87,89]. However, evaporative/sputtering 177 routes due to their high-energy preparation tend to yield p-type SnO thin films with uncontrolled n-178 SnO₂ surface contaminations [62,86,99,100]. Oxygen-poor environments such as carbothermal 179 preparations or nitrogen-protected synthesis environments yield n-type SnO due to oxygen vacancies 180 [81,87]. In solution routes interesting and complex morphologies (frames, bowls, pompon, etc.) of 181 SnO, suitable for VOC detection, have been demonstrated in amine-based and long-chain organic 182 solvents under solvothermal synthesis routes [87,101]. If SnO is to be adopted as a MOX VOC sensor, 183 its preparation will require controllability, scalability, and green synthesis chemistry. Simple and easily 184 scaled reflux chemistry routes using green solvents to produce SnO particles suitable for VOC 185 detection with reduced energy cost are available with reflux-solvent-controlled particle morphology 186 [89]. This work combines IPA reflux synthesis prepared p-type MOX SnO nanoflowers and additively 187 manufactured conductive LIG to produce novel VOC sensors. This system requires only a low mass-188 loading of the SnO nanoflowers to achieve VOC sensitivity at room temperature. The resulting device 189 requires fewer resources to produce and operate and is both sensitive and stable at ambient humidity 190 and room temperature, all essential for application as resource-efficient VOC sensors for future 191 applications, including worker safety.

193 Experimental Section

194 Device Fabrication

195 Laser Graphitization

Adhesive-backed polyimide tape (Radionics, 70 μ m, HB830) was drawn and affixed to clean glass slides, ensuring no air bubbles were trapped. The polyimide top surface was converted to laserinduced graphene by CO₂ laser (10.6 μ m, 30 W, Universal Laser system, PLS4.75) raster patterning at 4.2 W average laser power, ~200 mm s⁻¹ scan speed (1000 pixels per inch, PPI) and ~20 lines mm⁻¹ raster line density. Smooth edges were defined by a vector write (3.7 W average laser power, ~200 mm s⁻¹ scan speed and 1000 PPI), yielding two parallel rectangular carbon electrodes (10 mm X 3 mm) separated by ~100 μ m.

203 Particle Synthesis

SnO nanoflowers were synthesized following the method of *Jaśkaniec et al.* [89]. Anhydrous SnCl₂ (7.56g, Merck, 98%), was dissolved in deionized (DI) water (18.2 M Ω cm, 400 mL) in an ice bath. Ammonium Hydroxide (NH₄OH, 10 mL, 28%, Merck) was added dropwise while stirring, yielding a white precipitate, which was centrifuged and then washed with DI water and isopropyl alcohol (IPA, Merck, 99.7%). 3 g of this precipitate was dispersed in 60 mL IPA and refluxed while stirring in a mineral oil bath at 90°C for 18 hours until a brown/black dispersion was produced, which contained the SnO nanoflowers.

211 Device Fabrication

212 250 μL of the *as-produced* SnO nanoflower dispersion was added to 2 mL of IPA. 25 μL of the
 213 dilution was then dropcast onto the *as-fabricated* LIG electrodes and allowed to dry overnight yielding
 214 the VOC sensors. These devices were electrically contacted with mechanical clips.

215 Material Characterization

216 Raman

Raman spectra were acquired at multiple regions across the functionalized Laser-Induced
Graphitic Carbon-SnO hybrid sensor (Horiba XploRA Raman microscope, 532 nm, 50× objective, 2,400
sample grating, 60 s sampling time, 1 accumulation, 1% filter). Spectra are reported without
background subtraction or smoothing.

221 XRD

222 Precipitated nanoflowers were dried and deposited onto double-sided tape on microscope 223 slides to produce a powder film. A θ -2 θ powder X-ray diffraction scan (PANalytical X'pert PRO XRD, 224 copper anode, K_{\alpha1}=1.5406 Å, K_{\alpha2}=1.5444 Å, ½° divergence slit, generator voltage 45 kV, 40 mA), was 225 acquired between 20° and 80°.

226 Microscopy

Scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of LIG-SnO nanoflowers, covered with ~6 nm of
 Au, to reduce charging effects, were acquired using an FEI Quanta 650 scanning electron microscope
 (10 kV beam voltage).

230 Gas Sensing

We developed a simple system for headspace VOC vapor detection from multiple SnO-LIG sensors under controlled humidity conditions. This resource-efficient system would be within the budget of many undergraduate teaching labs.

234 Experimental setup for headspace vapor detection

An Arduino-controlled solenoid valve was employed to allow time-controlled venting of a dry nitrogen line, while maintaining consistent pressure (Supporting Information Fig A.3.1). The dry nitrogen line was divided into two paths, each connected to a flow controller. One line was connected to a bubbler containing deionized water, with check valves to prevent backflow, and then to a condenser. The humidified condenser output line and the dry nitrogen line rejoin in a mixer. The
relative humidity of the nitrogen line was controlled by changing the ratio of the gas flows at the flow
controllers to match ambient room humidity (~55-65% RH) as verified by a humidity detector (RS192TK Temperature and Humidity Datalogger).

243 Gas Sensing

The functionalized sensors were mounted in a 3D-printed sample holder, S.I. Fig. A.1.1, and electrically contacted with a maximum of 6 sensors per chamber. A 100 M Ω balancing resistor was connected in parallel to each device, Fig. A.2.1, to reduce the equivalent circuit resistance below the limit of the multi-channel multimeter used (Keithley DAQ 6510, 7700-20 slot card). Devices were measured simultaneously via multiplexing (NPLC (number of power line cycles) = 5, time between measurements: 100 ms) at laboratory room temperature (~18°C).

Cycles of separately humidified nitrogen gas vents and liquid phase solvent additions (1 μL-100 μL were carried out using micro-syringes (Hamilton, 10 μL/50 μL/100 μL) while monitoring the device resistance to determine the solvent response. The vapor phase concentration (ppm) arising from liquid phase aliquots of target individual VOCs (methanol (99.8%, Merck), ethanol 99.9%, Ocon), isopropyl alcohol (99.5% Merck), acetone (99.5%, Merck)) was verified using a photoionization detector (Tiger PID, 11.7 eV lamp), standardized against a reference gas (100 ppm isobutylene in balance air).

257 Aging study

 $_{258}$ 6 sensors were mounted in the sample holder and electrically contacted. Their sensing responses to 1 µL of methanol (~150 ppm) and 5 µL (~710 ppm) were recorded on the initial and subsequent days. The laboratory temperature and humidity were recorded each day and the vent humidity was set to match the laboratory humidity (~ 55-65% RH).

263 Computational Methods

264

265 Density functional theory (DFT) calculations were employed to investigate the interaction of MeOH, 266 EtOH, IPA, Ace and water at two specific low-energy facets of SnO: (001) and (101) [89,102]. 267 Calculations were conducted using a periodic plane wave basis set implemented in the Vienna Ab initio 268 Simulation Package (VASP) version 5.4 [103]. Core electrons were treated through the projector augmented wave (PAW) method and the valence electronic configurations used are: Sn: 5s²5p², O: 2s² 269 270 2p⁴, C: 2s²2p², and H: 1s¹ [104]. We employed the Perdew–Burke–Ernzerhof (PBE) approximation to 271 the exchange–correlation functional [105]. The plane wave cut-off is 400 eV, and a Monkhorst–Pack 272 sampling k-point grid of $(3 \times 3 \times 1)$ is used for both surfaces. The force convergence criteria was set at 273 2×10^{-2} eV Å⁻¹, while the energy convergence criteria is 1×10^{-4} eV. The equilibrium lattice parameters of SnO from this set-up are a = b = 7.59 Å, c = 24.03 Å, and $\alpha = \beta = \gamma = 90^{\circ}$ for the (001) SnO surface 274 and a = 12.39 Å, b = 7.62 Å, c = 23.93 Å, and $\alpha = \beta = \gamma = 90^{\circ}$ for the (101) SnO surface. 275

- 276 Adsorption energies were calculated using the following equation:
- 277

$$E = \sum E_{product} - \sum E_{reactant}$$

278 Where $\sum E_{product}$ is the summed energy of the product species and $\sum E_{reactant}$ is the summed energy of the 279 reactant species.

280

282 Results and Discussion

283 Laser-induced Graphitic carbon (LIG) has been reported by *Tour et al.* as a thermal conductivitybased VOC sensor [106], and by Paterakis et al. as a capacitive humidity sensing platform [107], due 284 285 to its high specific surface area, low resource cost, and ease of fabrication. Recently, LIG has been 286 demonstrated as a chemiresistive sensing element for the detection of NO_x [71–74]. However, these 287 works typically used critical raw materials (MoS₂) for functionalization. This work, demonstrates for 288 the first time the combination of LIG as a low-resource cost current collector for a chemiresistive 289 volatile organic compound (VOC) sensing platform, which is functionalized with a low mass loading of 290 earth-abundant semiconducting metal oxide (MOX) nanoparticles, namely tin monoxide (SnO). This 291 platform delivers the benefits of the LIG current collector with an inexpensive, widely available metal 292 oxide sensing platform, overcoming issues associated with high-cost semiconductor fabricated VOC 293 sensors.

This work used LIG as an electrode platform functionalized with separately synthesized p-type SnO nanoflowers to produce a VOC sensor. The sensors required only a low mass loading of SnO nanoflowers and two LIG electrodes separated by a small gap (\sim 100 µm). A low-cost, homemade, 3Dprinted sensing chamber lid and conventional lab glassware were used to mimic VOC headspace detection under ambient conditions.



3Ch Figure 2 a) Summary process flow for SnO synthesis, Laser-Induced Graphitic carbon formation and drop casting to produce VOC sensors, b) Schematic of VOC sensing apparatus.

302	Fig. 2a schematically shows the synthesis of SnO nanoflowers, following the method of Jaśkaniec
303	et al. with an IPA reflux solvent, and its combination with separately prepared LIG electrode (gap width
304	≈100 μ m) to produce a VOC sensor [89]. Six dried sensors were mounted in a custom, 3D-printed
305	sample holder (see A.1) and electrically contacted, and placed into a 600 mL glass flask, see Fig. 2b. A
306	Hotplate, 80°C, beneath the sensing chamber ensures rapid evaporation of the injected solvent to
307	produce VOC headspace vapor. Sequential liquid phase additions (Hamilton μ L syringe 10 μ L, 50 μ L,
308	250 $\mu L)$ of analyte VOCs and humidified N_2 vents (matched to ambient humidity \sim 55-65% RH, see A.3),
309	were carried out to investigate the VOC sensitivity induced by the SnO nanoflowers. The baseline
310	resistance of the sensors (~G Ω) exceeded the maximum measurable resistance of the multimeter
311	used (Keithly DAQ 6510), vs. its 100 M Ω detection limit. Therefore parallel balancing resistors (100
312	M Ω) were used to reduce the overall circuit resistance below the equipment measurement limit (see
313	A.2).



314

Figure 3 a) Scanning electron micrograph demonstrating the SnO nanoflower flower-like morphology. b) Scanning electron
micrograph of SnO nanoflowers drop cast on polyimide film displaying disordered, random aggregation. c) Powder X-ray
diffractogram of as synthesised SnO nanoflowers on a supporting glass slide. d) Raman spectrum of SnO NP on LIG electrode
surface.

Figure 3 shows the microstructure, crystal phase and oxidation state of the synthesized SnO nanoflowers. Fig. 3a demonstrates the expected interlocked disc nanoflower structure for particles produced in IPA [89]. The flower morphology comprises intersecting micron-scale disks with diameters of $4.0 \pm 0.5 \mu$ m and thickness ≈ 400 nm (see Fig. B1). SnO forms through a dissolution-reprecipitation process of intermediated Sn₆O₄OH₄ to produce nanoscale plates that aggregate into larger structures [85,94]. A_{1g}/E_g peak area ratios correspond inversely with number of layers of SnO [108]. We found A_{1g}/E_g peak area ratios ranging from 1.35-1.94, which correspond to bulk layers down to approximately 10-layers, which matches well with the large nanoflower particle structures. Assuming a Lorentzian Peak shape and applying the Scherrer formula for the (101) peak we find crystallite size of ≈ 1.08 nm in the direction perpendicular to the plane. This deviates from the observed particle thickness which is on the order of 100 nm and corresponds with a mesoscale structure composed of numerous aligned nanoparticle building blocks as observed for SnO in the literature [94].

331 When dropcast and dried on untreated polyimide, the IPA-suspended nanoflowers form a 332 sparse, discontinuous, self-aggregating network (Fig. 3b). Fig. 3c shows the X-ray diffractogram of the 333 as-synthesized nanoflowers, characteristic of the expected romarchite phase of SnO (JCPDS 06–0395 334 space group P4/nmm), with an additional broad peak, ascribed to unconsumed $Sn_6(OH)_4O_4$ [89,109]. 335 The SnO oxidation state is further verified through Raman spectroscopy (Fig. 3d), which shows the characteristic B_{1g} and A_{1g} peaks at 112 cm⁻¹ and 209 cm⁻¹, respectively, without any peaks that would 336 337 correspond with SnO₂ formation [109]. This confirms the successful synthesis of the high-surface-area, 338 MOX SnO nanoflowers, although with some unconverted Sn₆(OH)₄O₄. The nanostructured surface 339 enhances the surface area-volume ratio, increasing the adsorption sites, while the p-type 340 semiconductor nature of SnO, verified by a Mott-Schottky plot (Fig. C.1), should result in decreased 341 conductivity upon electron transfer [110–112]. Given that many VOCs are reducing gases (electron-342 donating), the resistance through the particle network should therefore increase upon VOC exposure.

343 In the absence of residue from LIG formation, the random aggregation of nanoflowers on 344 polyimide does not produce effective conduction channels, unless a high-mass-loading dense film is 345 used. Instead, LIG provides a scaffold for the aggregation of particles in the interelectrode gap region. 346 LIG is produced by raster scanning of a CO₂ laser source over a precursor substrate. This process has 347 been optimized to produce high-quality graphitic material, with low sheet resistance, high surface 348 area, and controlled surface morphology and dimensions [66]. Redeposition of graphic material and 349 lateral growth of LIG occurs as a side-effect of the laser graphitization process. While these effects 350 may limit the ultimate lateral critical dimensions of LIG devices, they also offer a route to promote

- 351 local aggregation of SnO nanoflowers and enable the formation of hybrid LIG-nanoflower conducting
- 352 networks with minimal SnO nanoflower mass loading, while maintaining a gap-like sensor geometry.



Figure 4 a) Scanning electron micrograph of partial hybrid carbon bridge-SnO nanoflower mediated conduction channel. b)
Scanning electron micrograph of hybrid carbon islands-SnO nanoflower mediated conduction channel. c) Schematic of carbon
bridge-SnO mediated conduction channel. d) Schematic of carbon islands-SnO mediated conduction channel.

357 Figure 4 shows examples of hybrid-SnO-LIG electrode bridging conformations in device gap regions. The carbon inclusions act both as a scaffold for the nucleation of SnO particles during the 358 evaporation of the drop-casting solvent and to reduce the effective gap width. Devices consist of 359 360 multiple, separate quasi-parallel LIG-SnO conduction channels (1+1 D network). The dominant conduction pathways can be viewed as either a LIG "bridge" (Fig. 4a,c), which connects the contact 361 362 electrode to a nanoflower aggregate, or LIG "stepping-stones" (Fig. 4b,d), which connect multiple 363 separated nanoflower aggregates. Other pathways and failure modes are demonstrated and discussed 364 in Appendix D.

Conduction across the interelectrode gap, therefore, includes contributions from the semiconducting nanoflowers (intrinsic p-type SnO), which dominate the device resistance, and the conductive LIG graphitic material. Given the room temperature operation of the sensors presented in this work, conventional ionosorbed oxygen models used to describe high-temperature semiconductor MOX sensors with full reduction of analytes are not appropriate [48,54,55,113]. However, the effect of MeOH molecular adsorption onto p-type nanoflowers could be considered in terms of electron density transfer to the MOX surface, either directly or else indirectly; mediated by adsorbed oxygen species. This could reduce the net hole carrier density at the nanoflower surface, leading to increased device resistance for aggregated nanoflower networks. Further, we note that no appreciable variation in sensing performance was observed, when operating in dry N₂ or dry air environments, suggesting no significant dependence on atmospheric oxygen. Control LIG devices fabricated without SnO nanoflowers showed no appreciable change in device resistance upon exposure to VOC vapors.





Figure 5 a) Schematic of sensing response behavior to methanol exposure. b) Response curve for a single representative VOC
sensor, colored bars highlight the addition of methanol. c) Grouped response curves for five sensors monitored simultaneously
during a sequentially higher methanol concentration exposure. d) Calibration curve of simultaneously monitored sensors
responding to MeOH solvent additions, demonstrating a mean Limit of Detection <200 ppm.

382 Figure 5a schematically depicts the DC resistance response of one of the hybrid SnO-LIG VOC 383 sensors in the custom chamber, which was designed to mimic headspace detection of VOC vapors at 384 ambient temperature (~18°C). Each run begins with one or more "blank" cycles to measure baseline 385 behavior without introducing the VOC solvent. For each blank cycle, the sensing chamber (≈0.6 L 386 volume) is purged with humidified nitrogen for 2 minutes (> 20 L/min., ~55-65% RH, matched to lab. 387 humidity). The system is allowed to equilibrate for 2 minutes, followed by a 4-minute "blank" period. 388 Following another "vent/wait" purge cycle, an aliquot of the VOC solvent is added using a micro-389 syringe and evaporates after landing on the heated chamber base. The response value, ΔR_L , is taken as the resistance increase \approx 3 mins after VOC addition, corresponding with the steady-state 390 391 measurement of gas phase VOC concentration using a photoionization detector, see Fig. E.1. Figure 392 5b shows a typical sensor response normalized to the initial resistance ($\Delta R_L/R_{L0}$) during multiple cycles 393 over a low MeOH concentration range from 150 ppm (1 µL aliquot) to 1310 ppm (10 µL aliquot). The 394 data show clear response increases with increasing VOC concentration.

395 Figure 5c demonstrates the reproducibility of 5 sensors simultaneously exposed to the same 396 concentration ramp (one device was excluded due to instability, shown in Fig. D.4). The response shape and percentage responses of these devices are similar, despite their varying baseline 397 398 resistances. A slight increase in the baseline is observed at higher concentrations (≥2310 ppm). This is 399 characteristic of incomplete venting. However, since the saturation concentration of the MeOH 400 headspace was measured under identical conditions (Fig E.1), the measured response accounts for this cumulative build-up at larger aliquot volumes. The MeOH response/concentration curves for 401 402 these sensors are presented in Fig. 5d, with corresponding limits of detection (LOD) tabulated in Table 403 2. The mean LOD for methanol, 170±40 ppm; is below the 8-hour OSHA and EPA worker safety limit 404 of 200 ppm [10–12].

406 Table 2 Limit of detection of methanol and ethanol extracted from Fig. 4d and 7b respectively.

Solvent	Device 1	Device 2 Device 3		Device 4	Device 5	Mean
	LOD (ppm)	LOD (ppm)	LOD (ppm)	LOD (ppm)	LOD (ppm)	LOD (ppm)
Methanol	149±3	225±8	167±4	197±6	122±2	170±40
Ethanol	210±9	188±8	106±2	205±9	179±7	180±40

407

The device-to-device variability in baseline resistance data (Fig. 5c) reflects the proposed conduction mechanism through self-aggregated SnO nanoflowers partially bridged by LIG. As noted above, the sensors show consistent response magnitude, shape and time dependence. For some devices with a high degree of carbon bridging (lower initial resistance), the sensor becomes less sensitive at high methanol concentrations (Fig. D.3) suggesting that the degree of carbon bridging could provide a viable route for future optimization.



416 Figure 6 a) Sensor response and recovery time towards 1 μL (150 ppm at saturation) of MeOH. b) Sensor response and
417 recovery time towards 50μL (4110 ppm at saturation) of MeOH.

The methanol addition response time is presented in Fig. 6. The time taken to rise to 90% of the maximum response (t_{90}) was $t_{90} \approx 30$ s for 1 µL (150 ppm) of methanol and $t_{90} \approx 57$ s for 50 µL (4110 ppm) of methanol. It is likely that the simple liquid phase addition-evaporation method employed here to generate headspace VOCs aliases the measured response time with the evaporation rate. For example, for the same chamber base temperature, we observe greater response times for ethanol (t_{90}

 ≈ 45 s for 1 µL), which has a higher boiling point than methanol. Therefore, we consider the measured response times to be an upper bound. The recovery time, ≈ 5 s, was unaffected by increased VOC concentration levels. We note that the solvent introduction method employed here enables resourceefficient study of a variety of VOC compounds and serves as a versatile pathfinding route to assess new sensor configurations.



428

429 Figure 7 Mean (n=4) response stability behavior of SnO-LIG hybrid sensor towards 1 μL (150 ppm) and 5μL (710 ppm) of
430 MeOH with aging.

431 Figure 7 shows the stability behavior of a set of four SnO-LIG hybrid VOC sensors monitoring MeOH 432 detection across 21 days. No degradation of sensing behavior is observed associated with the age of 433 the sensor or due to the cumulative exposure to MeOH over in the time window studied. The sensors 434 demonstrated DC resistance responses $\Delta R/R = 9 \pm 2\%$ to 5 μ L aliquots of methanol (~710 ppm) for 435 over 21 days in ambient conditions, without signs of ageing. The device variability reflects changes in 436 laboratory temperature and humidity over the period (Fig. F.1). Reduced variability was observed for 437 moderate laboratory temperatures (16-20°C) vs lower temperatures (13-16°C), see Fig. F.1d. Figure 8a shows the cross-selectivity behavior to ethanol, IPA and acetone. We observe 438

439 comparable response ($\Delta R_L/R_{L0}$) values for methanol (8.3±1.0%), ethanol (12.5±1.9%), and acetone

(8.8±0.7%). The response data for IPA demonstrates incomplete recovery behavior, suggesting a high
adsorption affinity at the SnO nanoflowers. This is not unexpected, given that IPA was the reflux
solvent for their synthesis. Figure 8b shows the response data vs. time for an ethanol concentration
ramp for our LIG-nanoflower devices and Fig. 8d shows the corresponding concentration-response
curves. The mean extracted LOD for ethanol is 180±40 ppm (Table 2), similar to the mean LOD for
methanol, 170±40 ppm.

446 The mechanism for VOC detection on SnO at room temperature is challenging to establish 447 experimentally and is therefore not described in detail in the available literature. Chemiresistive MOX 448 sensors are typically considered in terms of an oxygen-mediated process, devised in 1962 by Seiyama 449 et al. [19]. This route typically assumes a high temperature of operation to achieve oxygen radicals, or 450 charged oxygen species at more moderate temperatures. This mechanism has received broad 451 adoption due to its prevalence at high temperature and for noble metal decorated MOX systems, 452 catalyzing oxygen ionisation [49,55,113]. However, it may not be generalizable to room temperature 453 processes. Alternative mechanisms have been proposed, including water-mediated routes, and direct 454 adsorption with charge exchange. Water-mediated routes have been demonstrated at room 455 temperature on Fe₂O₃, depending on the formation of hydroxyl groups mediating the charge exchange 456 [114]. Similarly, direct adsorption and charge exchange have also been proposed to explain the 457 electron withdrawal of NO_x on MoS_2 at room temperature [72].



Figure 8 a) Cross-selectivity response towards 5 μL of MeOH, EtOH, IPA and Acetone. b) Response curve for five VOC sensors
simultaneously exposed to the same ethanol concentration ramp, colored bars highlight the addition of ethanol. c).
Calibration curve of simultaneously monitored sensors responding to EtOH solvent additions, demonstrating a mean Limit of
Detection <200 ppm.

The response of SnO to various reducing gases in this work was conducted using a humidified nitrogen gas flow. The sensing mechanism is unlikely to be oxygen mediated, as the nitrogen gas flow would provide no oxygen to restore those consumed on the MOX surface, and no significant drift between measurements was observed. Similarly, no significant dependence on humidity was observed. Consequently, the interaction between analyte gases (methanol, ethanol, isopropanol, acetone, and water) and SnO surfaces is expected to be an adsorption/charge exchange-based process.

471 The SnO nanoflowers are composed of two main planes; the flat regions (001) planes and the 472 edges (101) planes [89]. These particles aggregate at carbon debris forming a self-assembling SnO 473 nanoflower network between the current collectors, as shown in the SEM micrographs, fig. 4. Due to 474 their layered aggregate nanoflower structure, the granular network of SnO particles deviates from the 475 typical homogenous surfaces of spherical/rod/wire structures implicitly assumed in MOX 476 chemiresistive sensors. Instead, there are numerous particle junctions. Due to the flower morphology, 477 the particles will interface at (101) planes, rather than (001) planes as the petals block the overlap of 478 (001) planes. Therefore the conduction path is comprised of a series of (101) interfaces and parallel 479 paths through (001) top surfacs and (001) bulk regions. Consequently, the selectivity and degree of 480 interaction of a given analyte will depend on the morphology of the particles used and the relative 481 contributions of these two planes.

The conductivity through the (001) direction depends on a combination of the thickness of the (001) bulk and the degree of surface depletion layer thickness. In large particles, conduction is dominated by the bulk, with only a minor contribution from the more resistive surface depletion layer, caused by electron donation into the SnO. In smaller particles/high surface areas, this conduction is dominated by the depletion layer, either by narrowing the bulk area or by complete depletion. This effect is exaggerated in the (101) plane due to its smaller dimension, resulting in effective depletion 488 layer formation, and the granular network morphology ensuring conduction must be mediated489 through interfaces between (101) planes.

To examine the proposed adsorption/charge exchange-based mechanism in more detail, density functional theory (DFT) calculations of the interaction of analyte gases and SnO surfaces were performed. As SnO is a layered material, surface models of the top nanoflower surface, dominated by the (001) plane, and the nanoflower edges, dominated by the (101) plane, are studied. Interaction energies and the computed net Bader charge on Sn for each analyte-surface combination are presented in Table 3.

496 Table 3 Computed interaction energies and net Bader charge exchange for VOC analytes and water on SnO (001) and (101)
 497 surfaces

	SnO (001)						
	Surface	Methanol	Ethanol	Isopropanol	Acetone	Water	
Δ E (eV/molecule)	-	-0.29	-0.37	-0.45	-0.41	-0.43	
Sn net charge /	2.6	2.4-2.6	2.4-2.6	2.5-2.6	2.5-2.6	2.4-2.6	
electrons							
	Surface	Methanol	Ethanol	Isopropanol	Acetone	Water	
	SnO (101)						
Δ E (eV/molecule)	-	-0.78	-0.64	-0.65	-0.35	-0.50	
Sn net charge /	2.3-2.4	2.3-2.8	2.5-2.9	2.5-3.2	2.7-3.6	2.5-3.0	
electrons							
		.	*				

⁴⁹⁸

Based on the calculated interaction energies all species are expected to interact sufficiently at SnO surfaces at room temperature, with the smallest ΔE being -0.29 eV. The range of interaction energies for the analytes are consistent with the sensing ability of SnO, given that they are not so large as to indicate strong adsorption and not so weak that there is no interaction with the surface. No clear single interaction site can be seen in the atomic structures shown in Fig.9 which is consistent with the 504 magnitude of the interaction energies. There appears to be a preference on both surfaces for the 505 alcohol hydroxyl group and the carbonyl of acetone to be directed to the surface. Therefore the 506 observed humidity independence of the measurements can be explained by our computed interaction 507 energies that indicate no clear preference for water adsorption and water molecules can be displaced 508 by the analyte molecule. The energies and structures can also suggest that water and the analytes will 509 not compete for the same site. Conversely, the computed adsorption energy of water (-0.43 510 eV/molecule) and its high abundance during the vent can facilitate scouring the surface of other 511 analytes by displacing these species. The larger interaction energy of IPA (-0.45 eV), could partly 512 explain the incomplete removal behavior of IPA shown in Fig. 8a. This can also be caused by IPA being 513 the reaction solvent, which could stabilize the SnO (001) plane and promote preferential IPA binding sites [87]. 514

515 Different surfaces offer different interaction environments for adsorbing species. The (101) surface shows larger interaction energies than the (001) surface for all species, except acetone. This 516 517 enhancement is larger for the smaller molecules, e.g. -0.78 vs. -0.29 eV for methanol and -0.65 vs. -518 0.45 eV for IPA, which is likely associated with the greater steric hindrance of the larger groups, limiting 519 their access to the inter-sheet region. The surface orientation dependence of the interaction energies 520 means that the sensing response of SnO will be dependent on the contributions of the ensemble of 521 planes involved and this can be useful in motivating further work to control the dominant surface facet of nanostructured SnO. 522

The band gap of the SnO (101) surface was estimated from the valence to conduction band energy difference in the density of states (DOS) and is *ca.* 1 eV. This energy gap persists after the organic molecules and water interact at the surface, further indicating a non-chemisorption interaction. Typical atomic charges, computed from the Bader partitioning scheme [115], for Sn in the (101) surface layer and the sub-surface layer are 2.4 and 2.3-2.4 electrons respectively. Upon interacting with all molecules, Table 3, the charge of the top layer Sn atoms increases to 2.5-3.6

529 electrons. This indicates a partial oxidation of surface-terminating Sn species as a result of interactions 530 with the hydroxyl or carbonyl sites. As SnO is a p-type semiconductor, this would increase the 531 resistance due to the associated elimination of hole charge carriers caused by the charge donation 532 when this surface is exposed. By contrast on the (001) surface the change in Sn charges is negligible which is consistent with the weaker interactions between the molecules and this surface. This suggests 533 534 that the sensing is dominated by the more reactive (101) surface. As already outlined, due to the 535 sparse granular network, the conduction profile is dominated by a series of bottleneck regions of (101) 536 plane interfaces that effectively modulate conduction amplifying the response.





Figure 9 Optimised atomic structures of MeOH, EtOH, IPA, Ace and H₂O on SnO (001) and (101) surfaces. Colour scheme:
tin: dark grey, carbon: light grey, oxygen: red and hydrogen: white.

541 The resource-efficient hybrid LIG-SnO VOC sensors presented here demonstrate good sensitivity and stability under ambient conditions. They share the selectivity challenges common to all 542 chemiresistive MOX sensors fabricated using pristine or undecorated MOX particles. However, 543 reported literature methods to improve selectivity in chemiresistive MOX sensors (including co-544 545 deposition and decoration with noble metals) are resource-intensive and present sustainability 546 challenges [56,58,116]. Considering future resource-efficient methods to improve selectivity for our 547 LIG-SnO devices, Jaskaniec et al. observed that the choice of reflux solvent and temperature 548 determine the morphology of this family of SnO nanoparticles [89]. For example, butanol reflux led to cubic platelets instead of the nanoflowers produced from IPA reflux. Using distinct SnO particle 549 morphologies to create SnO-LIG sensing elements with known cross-selectivity behavior could enable 550 551 orthogonal sensing approaches based on multi-sensor arrays on a single substrate. Such sensor arrays, 552 integrated with a machine learning layer [117,118], could fingerprint the interaction matrix to enable 553 selective identification, and thus accurate concentration estimation for VOCs.

554

556 Conclusion

557 We report a resource-efficient hybrid SnO nanoflower-Laser-Induced Graphitic carbon (LIG) chemiresistive sensor platform for VOC headspace sensing at ambient temperature. This early 558 559 demonstration of SnO nanoflowers as VOC-sensitive MOX nanomaterials also features additive 560 integration at low mass-loadings with direct-written laser-graphitized 3D porous carbon contact 561 electrodes. The SnO-LIG sensors demonstrate responses characteristic of p-type semiconductors, 562 with increases in device resistance when exposed to methanol headspace vapor (~5% at 150 ppm, ~35% at 4100 ppm) or other reducing VOCs in a versatile, low-cost custom chamber. Density 563 564 functional theory simulations provide key information on the interaction of VOC molecules and water at SnO surfaces with different surface orientations. The (101) surface shows stronger, but still not 565 566 chemisorbed, interaction energies and a notable oxidation of surface tin sites, whereas the (001) 567 surface has weaker interactions with molecular species and no change in Sn oxidation state.

A limit of detection of 170±40 ppm was demonstrated for methanol, below 8-hour workplace safety exposure limits (200 ppm). Rapid response times ($t_{90}=35 \text{ s} @150 \text{ ppm}$ methanol, 5 s recovery) and stability > 21 days were demonstrated, competitive with existing resource-intensive chemiresistive MOX sensors [27,60,119]. These resource- and energy-efficient room-temperature chemiresistive SnO-LIG VOC sensors show significant potential for integration as low-power sensors for future wearable worker safety sensors or Edge-IoT applications [120].

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575

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