EXCESSIVE OUTPUT BY MEANS OF AIR IONIZATION

We have received an interesting article from California. Here is the short version of the article.

The Mechanism of The Electric Spark

Review of the research
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Dedicated to Professor J. S. Townsend whose pioneer research and theory laid the whole foundation for the study of the mechanism of the electrical spark discharge.

Although the electric spark has been known to mankind in its various manifestations from time immemorial, its mechanism has to date been little understood. The initial clarification of the mechanisms involved is due to J.S. Townsend as a result of his brilliant researches in the early nineteen hundreds. On the basis of his theory of ionization by collision by electrons and positive ions, the fundamental mechanisms active and especially the coefficients required in their application were made available.

In 1936 the present senior author was forced to describe the mechanism of spark discharge in terms of a modified but distinctly unsatisfactory Townsend theory. In 1935 the discovery of photo-ionization in air by corona discharge indicated a solution was not far off. The turning point of a more successful theory came in the discovery of streamers in positive point to plane corona in 1936. The quantitative analysis of the self-propagating positive streamer in all breakdown phenomena became clearly evident as a result of the data concerning electron avalanches. As a result a qualitative mechanism of sparking by streamer propagation from anode to cathode functioning by means of photo-ionization in the gas was established.

The Townsend Sparking Criteria

It will not be necessary here to derive the famous equation of Townsend for the current [i] in a gap between electrodes as a function of the photoelectric current [io] from the cathode, the gap length [x] and the coefficients [a] and [B]. For this the reader can go to any standard text. *(Editor: the equation is omitted)*

In this equation the first Townsend coefficient [a] represents the number of new electrons created in the gas by an initial electron in its advance of 1 cm along the field axis from the cathode.

The second Townsend coefficient [B] in Townsend's original theory was the number of new electrons created by a single positive ion in its advance of 1 cm along the field from the anode.

The quantity [a] has been extensively studied in various gases. It varies with the ratio of field strength to pressure, X/p, where [X] is in volts per centimeter and [p] is in millimeters of Hg.

Note: the reason we are going through this is to determine the actual increase in current provided by the spark gap, and thus be able to design the circuit to avoid blowing out semiconductor components. It also provides a sound and already proven scientific theory to work from giving us a good foundation and the confidence to proceed with technical design work.

The quantity [B] has been evaluated, albeit rather inaccurately, from the variations of [i] with [x] at various higher values of X/p, by many observers in different gases. Inasmuch as it has now been shown that there are numerous other mechanisms other than impact with positive ions, which can liberate the secondary electron, needed in discharge.

There has been an inclination to give up the mechanism of impact ionizations by positive ions in gas. The discovery of measurable photoelectric ionization in gas has now made it possible to explain such cases. The exact way in which photo-ionization in the gas could operate to cause a spark, was not clear until the development of the present **streamer theory**.

The Streamer Theory of Spark Discharge Anode Space-Charge Field Due to an Avalanche

Assume a spark gap of 1 cm in length. Assume that in air at atmospheric pressure the potential across the plates is 31,600 volts, which is the conventionally observed sparking potential [Vs].

Let us then calculate what happens in the field to one of those electrons. It starts across the gap, quickly acquiring an average random energy of some $E=1/2mC^2= 3.6$ electron volts and a drift velocity [v] in the field direction of about 1.5 to 2 times 10^7 centimeters per second. As it moves it creates new electrons at a rate of [a] per centimeters in the field direction so that in a distance [x] it and its progeny amount to e(ax) electrons, forming what is called an **electron avalanche**.

Therefore, e(ax) positive ions have been left behind by the electron group, virtually where they were formed in the 10^{-7} second of advance for the electrons in the distance x=q across the plates. As the electron avalanche advances, its tip is spreading laterally by the random diffusive movement of the electrons.From these data it is possible to compute the density of positive-ion space charge left behind at any point [x]. The value of [a] under these conditions is about 17, making e(aq)=e(17). The first ion pair is created at 0.0407 cm from the cathode. At 0.5 cm from the cathode there are 4914 ions, at 0.75 cm there are 3.66 times 10^5 ions, and within 0.0407 cm from the anode there are 1.2 times 10^7 ions. **Most electrons will be drawn to the anode except for some few that are bound by the positive ions, making a sort of a conducting discharge plasma in the avalanche.**

Such a distribution of ions does not make a conducting filament of charges across the gap, and hence in itself an avalanche that has crossed does not constitute a breakdown of the gap. Thus one must look further for the mechanism of the spark.

If Loeb and Meek are correct then if we assume a spark gap of 3 mm and a voltage of 5,000 voltsthere are roughly 2,000 electrons created by avalanche for every one electron leaving the cathode. They state that most of these 'free electrons' are absorbed by the anode. [This would certainly explain why the semiconductor components cannot handle the current gain.]

NOTE: Loeb and Meek make little reference to initial amperage. There are only two values they refer to 10^{-5} ampere and 10^{-12} ampere.

In conclusion: Sparks and Arcs are two different beasts. My initial research into the amperage necessary to form an arc does not apply to spark and the process of avalanche where this huge gain mechanism is possible.

Photoelectric Ionization in Gas as a Secondary Mechanism

Accompanying the cumulative ionization there is produced by electrons from four to ten times as many excited atoms and molecules. Some are excited to an energy exceeding the ionizing potential of some of the atoms and molecules present, either by excitation of an inner shell, by ionization and excitation, or in a **mixed gas like air by the excitation of molecules of higher ionizating potential, e.g., N2**. These excited atoms or molecules emit radiations of very short wave length in some 10^{-8} second. This short ultraviolet radiation is **highly absorbed** in the gas and leads to ionization of the gas. In fact, the whole gas and the cathode as well are subjected to a shower of photons of all energies traveling from the region of dense ionization with the velocity of light. Thus nearly instantaneously in the whole gap and from the cathode new photoelectrons are liberated which almost at once begin to ionize cumulatively.

The Mechanism of Positive Streamer Formation

The photoelectrons created at points in the gas and at the cathode at any great radial distance from the avalanche axis will merely create other avalanches. Those in the gas will be short and those coming from the cathode region will be long and like that of the initial avalanche. Being smaller and, in any case, later in creation than the parent avalanche, such avalanches will be of no interest in breakdown. However, those photoelectrons created near the space-charge channel of positive ions, and especially near the anode, will be in an enhanced field, which exerts a directive action drawing them into itself. If the space-charge field [X1] is in the order of magnitude of the imposed field [X], this action will be very effective. In addition the values of [a] will be much enhanced.

The electrons from the intense cumulative ionization of such photoelectron avalanches in the combined fields [X] and [X1] which are drawn into the positive space charge feed into it, making it a conducting PLASMA which starts at the anode. The added fields will be most effective along [X] and so will the ionization. The positive ions they leave behind will therefore extend the space charge towards the cathode. These electrons also create photons, which produce electrons to continue this process. **In this fashion the positive space charge develops toward the cathode from the anode as a self-propagating positive space-charge streamer.**

As the streamer advances towards the cathode it produces a filamentary region of intense space-charge distortion along a line parallel to the field. The conducting streamer of a plasma consisting of electrons and ions extending to the anode thus makes a very steep gradient at the cathode end of the streamer tip. As this advances toward the cathode the photoelectron avalanches produced by radiation at the cathode, especially at the intercept of the extended streamer axis at the cathode, it begins to produce an intense ionization near the cathode. Hence the positive ions created there may increase the secondary emission. Thus, as the space-charge streamer approaches the cathode a cathode spot is forming which may become a source of visible light.

When the streamer reaches the cathode there is a conducting filament bridging the gap. As the streamer tip reaches the cathode the high field produces a rush of electrons towards the end of the streamer. This if followed by a current of electrons, gives a high-potential wave, which passes up the preionized conducting channel to the anode, **multiplying the electrons present by a large factor**. The channel is thus rendered highly conducting. If the metal can emit a copious supply of electrons because of the formation of an efficient cathode spot, the current of electrons continues the channel maintaining its high conductivity and **ever increasing in it**. This current, unless limited by external resistance, will then develop into **an arc**. It is, however, the intense increase in ionization by the potential wave, which gives the highly conducting channel characterizing the spark.

Conclusion: According to Loeb and Meek there are three means by which a spark in open air will provide a very large current gain. If this is true, it should be fairly easy to prove with inexpensive and unsophisticated equipment. Once the actual amount of current gain has been determined for the design parameters of the spark gap, then the rest of the circuit can be designed for the increased current value.

Editor: It is worth of a note that the current gain by means of ionization was patented by Pavel N. Yablotchkov (the patent of France # 120684, October 11th 1887). Some two years ago one of our issues featured an article about him. We think it is worth being published again.

PATENT of 1877 by Pavel N. Yablotchkov

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Pavel N. Yablotchkov was born in 1847 near Saratov, Russia. He graduated as a Military Engineer in 1866 and spent several years in the Russian Army.

In 1872 he came to Moscow and started his activities in electrotechnical field. Since 1875 he had been working in Paris with the famous Louis Breget and his first French patent # 110479 of November 29th, 1875 was dedicated to an electromagnetic transformer. Then he developed and patented a lighting system (the well-known Yablotchkov electrical candle). In 1876 he patented a new electromagnetic transformer for industrial purposes, France # 115793 of November 30th, 1876.

The most interesting patent claim on over-unity devices by Pavel N. Yablotchkov is known as France patent # 120684, October 11th, 1877, "The system of distribution and amplification of electrical currents by means of atmosphere electricity..." The patent describes special capacitors connected in series with the load to increase the output current by means of ionization. Experiments were conducted together with the well-known physicists such as Dr. Maskar, Dr. Varren-Delaru and others and **they confirmed the 200 % efficiency of the circuit**. Now we will try to explain the method.

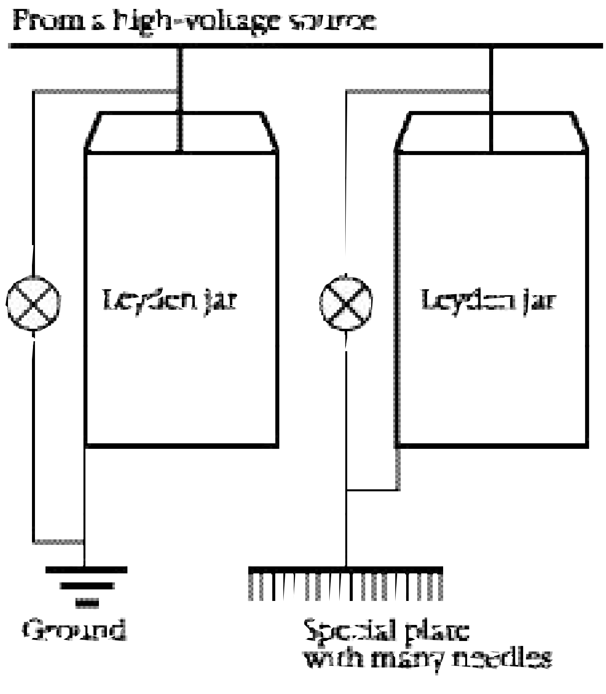

Fig.1 features a schematic drawing taken from Yablotchkov's patent. The Leyden jar is an asymmetrical capacitor, i.e. it is different in principle from a two-plate flat capacitor. The inner electrode of the jar should be connected to a high-voltage source and in this case the changes of the potential have an effect on the potential changes on the external electrode. It does not work in the opposite case and if you connect a high-voltage source to the external electrode no potential changes will be detected on the inner electrode. Connection to the ground or to a special plate (which is covered with many needles to increase air ionization) is necessary to attract the maximum number of electrons to the plate surface or to return the maximum electrons from the plate surface when potential changes on the external electrode are produced by means of electrical induction in the Leyden jar.

In conclusion I should mention one more supposition of the secrets of the well-known Swiss M-L converter (Methernitha). The main elements of the design are Leyden jar capacitors, which have the external surface made of perforated metal.

The other known fact is that great ionization of air is observed when the converter is in operation. So, the electrostatic machine can produce pulses of a very high voltage (potential difference) but it cannot be used as a source of a powerful current. In order to increase the current in the circuit we should apply a certain method and Yablotchkov's technology seems to be appropriate. A large surface of the external electrode of the Leyden jar can be a good solution to the problem. Maximum strong ionization allows us to obtain the output current several times stronger than the weak current generated by the electrostatic machine.