

Has Graphene lived Up to the Hype?

Pooja Rani*

Abstract

Graphene, a single or few layers of the humble graphite and consisting of carbon atoms arranged in a honeycomb lattice, is the flagbearer of revolutionary technology called nanotechnology, which deals with materials on the nanoscale (1–100 nm). It has been hailed as a “wonder material” ever since its Nobel prize-winning discovery in 2004. The theoretical study of graphene was started in 1947 by physicist Philip R. Wallace as a first step to understanding the electronic structure of graphite. The term graphene was introduced by chemists Hanns–Peter Boehm, Ralph Setton, and Eberhard Stumpp in 1986 as a combination of the word graphite and the suffix -ene. With remarkable electrical, thermal, and mechanical properties, it has attracted global interest in research and investment. It was even touted to replace silicon in next-gen electronics. The fact that graphene created a whole new class of materials is arguably its most lasting legacy. The focus shifted to other layered materials once scientists proved that a single atomic layer could exist and be stable. A variety of two-dimensional materials with distinct qualities quickly developed. This expansion revolutionized condensed matter physics and materials science. When scientists started stacking various two-dimensional layers, they discovered novel phenomena like tunable optical responses and exotic electronic states. In this way, the real significance of graphene might not be found in its practical uses but rather in the paradigm shift it spurred. However, nearly two decades later, graphene’s real-world commercial applications remain limited. This article critically evaluates whether graphene lives up to its hype by examining its potential, current applications, mass production challenges, and commercial realities.

Keywords: Bandgap, carbon, electronics, graphene, two-dimensional materials

INTRODUCTION

Graphene, a single sheet of carbon atoms, first isolated by UK Professors Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov in 2004 using a simple scotch tape method (earning them the Nobel Prize in 2010) [1], has been celebrated as a revolutionary candidate among 2-D materials where one dimension of the material is reduced to the nanometre scale. With its quite unusual structure and properties, it has generated a buzz in the research arena and attracted the industry people to invest in this wonder material. It is predicted to be capable of transforming industries ranging from electronics to energy storage [2]. Its remarkable properties – about 200 times stronger than steel, highly conductive, optical transparency, and incredibly thin – have led to predictions of breakthroughs in flexible electronics, sensors, supercapacitors, desalination, and even drug delivery.

Despite its promise, widespread industrial use of graphene is still scarce. The current paper investigates whether graphene’s capabilities match the initial expectations and evaluates if it has delivered meaningful advances or if it has become a case of overhyped scientific enthusiasm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graphene is a two-dimensional counterpart among many allotropes of carbon, where atoms are tightly packed in a honeycomb structure. Its key properties include:

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- *Two-Dimensional Geometry:* The fact that graphene is the first and most basic example of a two-dimensional crystal – that is, a solid substance with only one layer of atoms arranged in an ordered pattern contributes to its particular appeal in new age technology [3]. Every carbon atom in graphene is covalently bound to three other carbon atoms. This peculiar arrangement of atoms is the reason that gives graphene its unique properties. Surfaces, membranes, and interfaces are examples of two-dimensional systems that are extremely important to biology and other natural sciences, in addition to physics and chemistry.
- *Electrical Conductivity:* Graphene has a range of electronic and electrical properties. It has a unique electronic band structure where the valence band and conduction bands meet at the Dirac point, giving graphene the metaphor “zero band gap semiconductor”. This leads to graphene being a very good conductor. It also has higher mobility of charge carriers than any known material ($250,000 \text{ cm}^2/\text{Vs}$) [4]. Electron delocalization (as shown in Figure 1) and a weak electron–phonon interaction give graphene its high mobility, which makes it the perfect material for electrical applications that demand quick reaction times and great mobility.

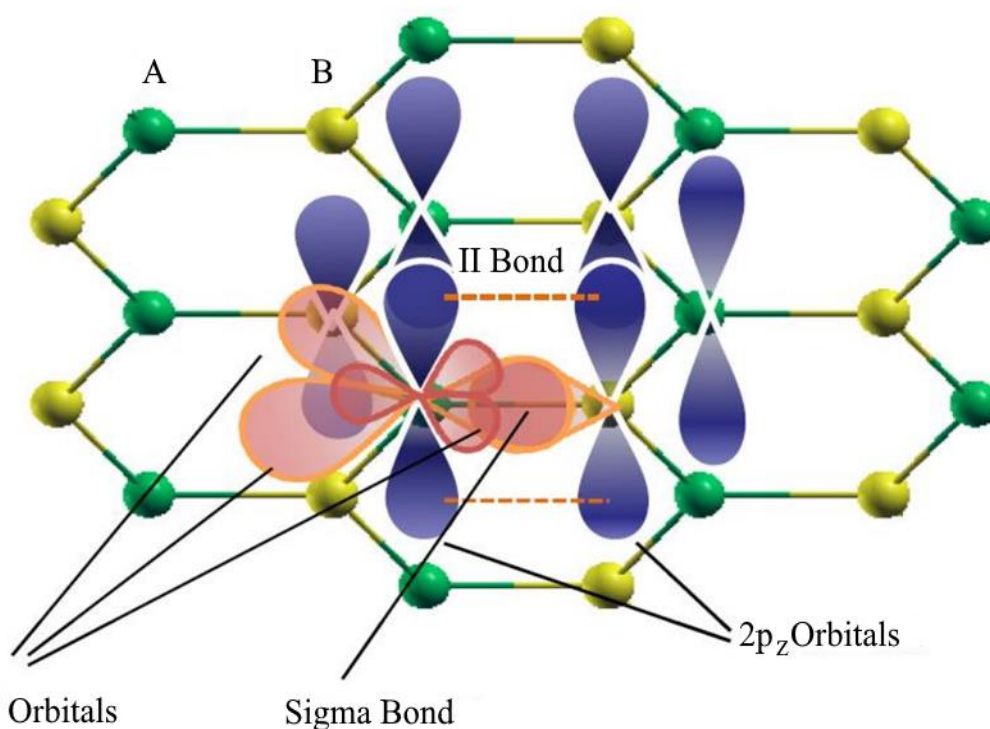


Figure 1. Two-dimensional geometry of graphene representing sp^2 hybridized carbon atoms.

- *High Mechanical Strength:* Graphene is extremely strong despite its thinness. The unique composition of carbon atoms provides it with that extra strength. It is among the most resilient materials that humans have yet encountered. It is quite sturdy and can tolerate a great deal of stress. It has a tensile strength of 130 GPa, far stronger than steel [5].
- *Thermal Conductivity:* Its thermal qualities increase its appeal. In comparison to copper, which is known for its heat conduction, graphene has exceptional thermal conductivity (Over 5000 W/mK) [6] and is excellent for heat dissipation. This characteristic is facilitated by electrons, which help move energy away from hotspots. Devices that produce surplus heat can take advantage of the application of graphene in thermal management systems.
- *Optical Properties:* Graphene has interesting optical properties. It absorbs only 2.3% of visible light, which makes it nearly transparent [7]. Its spectrum is broad, spanning from ultraviolet to infrared. These properties, combined with electrical conductivity, enable graphene to be used to make touchscreens and solar cells.

- *Light in Weight:* Graphene is extremely lightweight [8]. In fact, 1 cm of a graphene sheet only weighs 0.7 gms. It is of great benefit in fields where weight reduction is critical like space vehicles.
- *Flexibility in Shape, Size, and Form:* Despite its strength, Graphene is quite flexible [8]. It can be bent to make carbon nanotubes, folded to make buckyballs, or stacked to form graphite. That's why it is called the mother of all other forms of carbon. Its flexibility makes it employable in wearable devices.

The above-mentioned properties make it attractive for diverse applications, theoretically enabling faster electronics, stronger composites, telecommunications, automotive, and highly efficient sensors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some of the important fields where graphene has successfully found its place are as follows:

- *Electronics and Computing:* Because of its versatility, graphene may be utilized in flexible displays, bendable screens, wearable technology, and quantum computing. By enabling devices that are more robust, lightweight, thin, and sustainable, these applications have the potential to revolutionize the consumer electronics sector. Because of its high electron mobility, graphene is an ideal material for next-generation transistors and semiconductors. It is speculated to replace silicon in processors [9], enabling faster processing speeds and lower power consumption.
- *Energy Storage:* Graphene is being contemplated as a potential substitute for the materials now utilized to store ions on the electrodes of supercapacitors [10]. This is because a substance with a large surface area is what you want. Its capacity to store more ions increases with its surface area. Theoretically, each gram of graphene has a surface area of about 2600 square meters [11]. Graphene-based supercapacitors and battery electrodes have shown promise, offering higher capacity and faster charging times [12]. However, most commercial devices use graphene only in small amounts or in combination with other materials.
- *Healthcare Sector:* Graphene's biocompatibility, anti-microbial properties, and surface area make it useful in drug delivery, biosensors, and other biomedical applications [13]. The possible benefits of a graphene covering for endovascular implants, like stents or valves, have been the subject of numerous studies. Most of them show that graphene coating has an edge over other treatments that are currently on the market in terms of improved hemocompatibility and easier endothelialization [14]. Graphene-based materials are being used in tissue and bone engineering and photothermal therapy [15].
- *Miscellaneous Applications:* Graphene is being used in spacecraft, automobile components, and sports equipment to increase strength and corrosion resistance. These are currently the most economically feasible applications. When added to concrete, graphene enhances its mechanical properties, including strength, durability, and resistance to cracking. This means less material is needed to achieve the same or better performance. Graphene has numerous other applications such as a catalyst, lubricant, and packaging material [16].

MAJOR BARRIERS TO WIDESPREAD ADOPTION

- *Manufacturing Limitations:* Producing high-quality graphene on a mass scale is expensive and inconsistent. Although graphene can be synthesized using several top-down and bottom-up techniques [17, 18], few methods provide a good quality of graphene on a large scale. Even the chemical vapor deposition (CVD) technique [19, 20], one of the most promising methods, faces issues like defects and substrate removal. Also, graphene is primarily synthesized from non-renewable raw materials associated with fossil fuels, which produce hazardous byproducts at different stages of manufacturing.
- *Economic Viability:* Despite billions in research funding, graphene remains an expensive material. Competing technologies often offer better cost-performance ratios. Graphene or new materials, overinvestment without a clear product-market ratio may result in short-term disenchantment, or the "valley of death" [21]. According to the data, graphene applications are expected to contribute significantly to economic growth over the next five to ten years, with a 42.1% growth rate from 2014 to 2022. Graphene's cost is correlated with its quality, though [22]. The higher the quality, the greater the production cost.

- Regulatory and Safety Concerns:** Graphene’s environmental and health impacts are not fully understood. Nanomaterials pose challenges for regulation, slowing market introduction in sensitive sectors. However, concerns about long-term toxicity, safe limits for graphene amounts for human cells, and biodegradability have not been established yet [23]. According to the evaluation of graphene-based materials, SDS (Safety Data Sheets) are still not entirely trustworthy in providing adequate guidance on possible health and safety hazards as well as the proper handling and storage of the materials’ tiny forms [24]. Graphene Flagship project’s research about the health and environmental implications of graphene and other 2D materials is currently ongoing, and firm findings have not yet been reached [25].

THE HYPE VS. REALITY

The term “hype” refers to dreamy expectations driven by media, investors, and sometimes the scientific community. In graphene’s case, it garnered tremendous hype ever since its discovery in 2004 and was burdened with difficult standards through exaggeration by the media. Hopes were naturally sky high from a material decorated with superlatives like wonder, super, miracle, material of the century, transformative, revolutionary, and even a gift from the gods. Money started flooding in for research and development funding. Graphene is slowly and steadily delivering its promise in various applications (Figure 2).

But predictions of graphene replacing silicon, revolutionizing smartphones, or enabling space elevators to have not materialized. Most applications use minimal amounts of graphene or use it as an additive rather than as a primary material. Graphene is useful, but not transformative – yet. Somehow, its potential was compromised along the way because of destructive processing techniques and the absence of a new electronics paradigm to adopt it. But we should not forget that graphene heterostructures and composites are being used in many applications. And graphene has opened the door to an altogether new world of two-dimensional materials like h-Bn, phosphene, silicene, and many more. And the bonus us it can even be produced from garbage. So, this material should be allowed to follow its natural course and shouldn’t be judged. Graphene should be seen as a valuable material for specific, high-performance applications rather than a panacea.

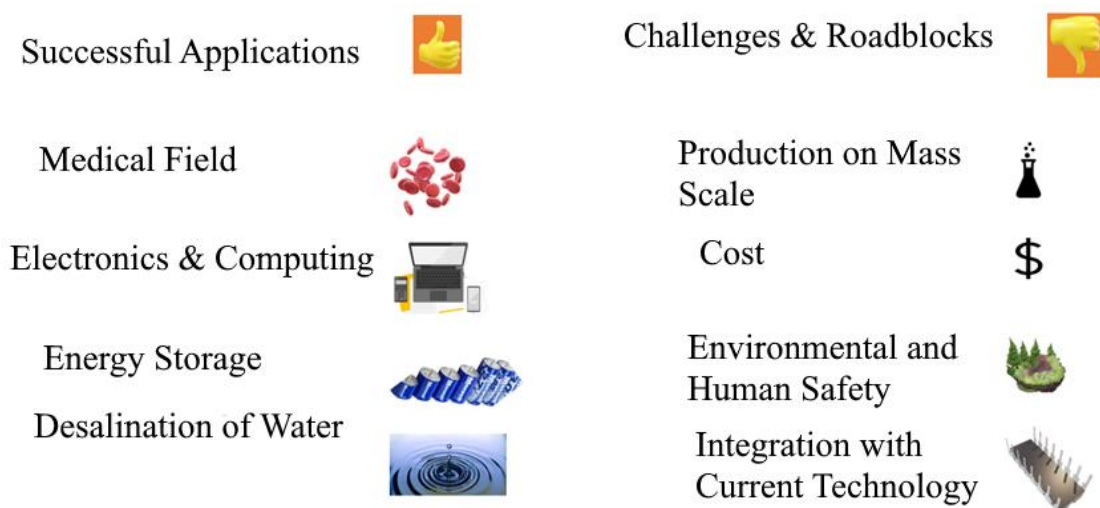


Figure 2. Successful applications and challenges for these applications.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With advancements in graphene oxide and other graphene derivatives indicating simpler processing pathways, graphene research is still expanding [26–28]. Development of 2D heterostructures based on graphene and 2D materials like MoS₂ and h-BN. The TMDCs [29–32] open up a new era of materials and offer a means of creating and modifying almost infinite new physics and device characteristics. To

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create robust, underlying value networks and advance the commercialization of graphene-based materials and technologies, the industry has identified the processes and characterization methods as a major obstacle to innovation in the field. The Graphene Flagship Program is working to standardize certification procedures and quality criteria [33].

With its continued developments in energy storage, electronics, and medical uses, graphene is predicted to transform several industries in the years to come. Graphene may become more affordable in bulk than silicon, which would enable it to penetrate all currently silicon-dominated areas, including computing, chip manufacturing, sensors, solar cells, etc. For instance, silicon is brittle and cracks when bent, thus it cannot be used in flexible mobiles of the future. Graphene provides a competitive answer in this regard.

Graphene has the potential to improve electrical gadgets, increase energy efficiency, and contribute to the next wave of technological developments with continued study and development. There is a lot of potential for growth and commercial expansion in graphene-based electronics as long as companies keep pushing the boundaries of what is practical. As more sectors embrace high-performing, lightweight, and sustainable materials, the market for graphene-based technologies is anticipated to expand rapidly. Rising R&D expenditures and supportive government regulations that support sustainable technology will also aid this.

Contribution to Sustainability

In materials research, graphene provides numerous environmental advantages that support sustainability [34]. Because of its breakthrough qualities, less effective and more polluting materials can be produced, opening the door for greener processes and innovations. Moreover, graphene-based products can be recyclable and biodegradable, which increases their sustainability.

By converting waste into graphene, industries can transition toward a more sustainable and circular economy, addressing both material scarcity and environmental concerns. Researchers at Rice University have reported a sustainable way to synthesize graphene from waste materials like coffee beans and plastic waste by using flash heating [35].

SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

Graphene is not a miracle material that will substitute all other materials, but it is also not a disappointment. The initial hype overtook practical development, leading to inflated expectations. Nonetheless, graphene has found real, if limited, applications, and ongoing research may unlock more potential. Its future likely lies in niche, high-value applications, not mass-market products. With improved production techniques and realistic expectations, graphene can still play an important role in advanced materials science.

It serves as a valuable lesson in balancing scientific enthusiasm with realistic timelines and commercialization challenges. There is little doubt that graphene is a ray of hope for 21st-century developments, pushing society to reconsider the limits of what is possible in terms of materials. Consistent efforts, mindful investments and following proper safety standards will surely aid in keeping the promise of graphene being a wonder material.

CONCLUSION

There is no denying graphene's influence on materials science. Although less obvious, the effect on consumer goods is real. As long as it functions, consumers can be blissfully ignorant that graphene is present in their automobile, cell phone, etc. We may anticipate that graphene will be used more as production techniques advance and costs come down.

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