Investigating TriHaloMethanes with respect to humidity

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Investigating FAIMS Response to Trihalomethanes with Respect to Humidity


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1. Introduction

The disinfection of potable water has dramatically reduced the instances of cholera and similar ailments within a population drawing upon that water source. However, it is now recognized that the use of organic coagulants can interact with the disinfection compounds to form disinfection by-products (DBPs). One group of DBPs are Trihalomethanes (THMs) with several compounds of the group being suspected carcinogens. Within the UK the total concentration of all THMs within drinking water must not exceed 100µg/L.

As present water authorities take samples of the water supply and return them to a central laboratory for analysis. This provides an accurate test but one which can involve a long lead time in discovering a potential hazard to public health.

A Field Atomic Ion Mobility Spectrometer (FAIMS) sensor may be ideally placed to perform in-situ continuous monitoring at particular sites. As part of a PhD co-supervised by The Open University and Owstle Nanotech Plc an investigation is ongoing to discover how sensitive a FAIMS device is with respect to THMs and humidity when sampling. Initial results and the method of data processing, which involves peak fitting to evolving spectra are presented.

2. Trihalomethanes and FAIMS

The formation of THMs is dependent upon the location of the water reservoir. Open air reservoirs and concrete tanks have different coagulants in use which can be highly hazardous to health. Chlorine and bromine, their structures being presented below.

As mentioned within the introduction the total permitted abundance of THMs within UK drinking water is 100µg/L (1µg/L) in the US under new regulations [2]. Therefore it is a requirement that all THMs can be detected.

There have been previous studies of systems incorporating FAIMS with the detection of THMs within drinking water. Of particular note are the extreme sensitive readings from BIS et al [3]. Those studies however used a FAIMS system as a preliminary stage to a mass spectrometer. To provide a significant step to what is already accomplished through salting and analysis within the lab is to require that this detection be completed in situ. This will reduce the time taken to take appropriate action given an excessively high level of THMs within the potable water supply.

A stand alone FAIMS system may provide the ideal solution. While the system would not be as sensitive as used in conjunction with additional technologies such as gas chromatography and mass spectrometry it would be able to operate in ambient conditions of temperature and pressure. The system used within this investigation incorporated the Owstle Nanotech FAIMS chip [4] which is a miniaturised solid-state device. The security in energy requirements meant that any analogue precursor or a small size, low power requirement and high reliability.

3. Experimentation

The limit of detection of the THMs and the FAIMS response with respect to concentration were questions that were to be determined. It was therefore the case that an exponential dilution flask (EDF) experiment [5] was used for the investigation.

EDF experiments consist of a sample task which is continuously flushed with a flow. Analysis is introduced into the flask, typically through an injection, and over time the concentration of the analyte will be continuously diluted by the incoming flow. The concentration within the EDF is expressed through the equation:

\[ C = C_0 \exp \left( -\frac{t}{\tau} \right) \]

It is therefore possible to easily generate a large range of known concentrations.

An Owstle Lonestar unit was used to sample the EDF as the EDF allows the response of a FAIMS system with respect to varying concentration of THMs to be observed.

The sample line from the EDF to the Lonestar and the EDF itself were maintained at an elevated temperature throughout data collection.

Two airflows were passed into the EDF. One was a clean and dry air line while the second was a clean and dry air line which was passed through a bubbling water bottle. Through the control of nozzle valves the humidity within the EDF was maintained.

The Lonestar system requires a carrier gas of clean dry air at 20%. While the system can operate by drawing air ambient air, the unit was provided with clean and dry air to remove the possibility of any degradation to the scrubber during the investigation. Irrigation was provided through a 55MSBR µCi source.

Through initial testing a suitable dispersion field was discovered which provided good separation of ion species at an acceptable sensitivity. Data was recorded with the dispersion field as a constant to minimise the variation. It was therefore possible to observe the formation and evolution of separate ion species across a large concentration range.

In between experiments the instrumentation was left to flush through to mitigate against any residual analyte from the previous data collection affecting later runs.

6. Discussion and Further Work

An initial surprise was the strong positive polarity response to the introduction of the THMs. The strong signal was sourced from one main and symmetric Chloroform compound. After this however the system appears to be more sensitive with increasing amounts of bromine present.

The limits of detection are too high to be of immediate use to the water industry. Modest pre-concentration, such as up and trap, may provide the required LOD and provide the method of sampling needed to remove the THMs from the water for analysis [3].

4. Data Processing

The response from the FAIMS device is made up of many compensation voltage (CV) spectra. Each sweep of compensation voltage provides a snapshot of the ion species present at that particular time of scanning. These spectra contain Gaussian peaks due to the ion species present.

The response is gathered through a Faraday cup which provides a summed response of the Gaussian curves. The compensation voltage of the Gaussian peaks within a FAIMS device are known to be dependent upon the identity of the ion species present. It is therefore of special interest to obtain the most accurate determination of component mass present as possible.

Since the response from each ion species is summed, any response which results in two or more Gaussian curves overlapping with one another will result in the low position and intensity of the peaks being a result of the mixing Gaussian. Deconvolution of the signal is required to obtain the true CV position and intensity of the reported species. Peak fitting can be used to discover the most likely initial Gaussian responses which have resulted in the amalgamated response provided by the FAIMS system.

Within FAIMS studies the observation of a Gaussian peak is often attributed to a single ion species. When FAIMS has been used as a preliminary stage to mass spectrometry it is often observed that there are in fact several ion species responsible for a single Gaussian observed.

With this knowledge it is tempting to fit as many Gaussian on as possible to the data in the hopes of being able to uncover underlying features. The result of this process is often to create fits which no longer correspond to the features of the raw data.

It is important to be able to decide which peaks fits to the easily identifiable number of peaks present from the raw data and from known or anticipated chemical reality [6]. This will mean mass spectrometry will always be required to identify the exact constitution of the peaks. However, if the process of fitting a low number of peaks allows us to identify trends within a data set. Also the improved CV positions and ion intensity values are still extremely relevant for investigations.

The spectra shown in section 5 are single CV sweeps. If the relevant values of CV position and ion intensity are recorded for each single sweep and plotted with respect to time we can observe how they evolve over time. Two important quantities can now be discerned from each EDF run, the CV position of peaks resulting from THMs and the limit of detection of the system.

5. Peak Fitting

The raw data undertakes a stage where the baseline is corrected back to zero. This is required due to the effects of the electronics of the system.

The data is then automatically preliminary inspected by an algorithm which determines the maximum points and also draws the initial CV positions and intensity from each peak. This information is then used in the advanced algorithm employing an advanced fitting function method. This provides the final CV.

A CV is a single point on a Peptide, it is not a line. So this can also be added from the Faraday cup. This displays a good fit and it can see from the second file that the fitted points are exactly aligned to the main peaks in the raw data.

This investigation was constructed to investigate not only the FAIMS response to THMs but also the effect humidity has on that response. Unfortunately the experimental set-up resulted in a very small range of humidity which proved stable. The EDF was therefore subjected every 2-4 (cm) from the source by saturated.

A) initially starts with low humidity and then later saturates levels. The high humidity appears to stabilise the experiment over a longer period.

B) displays the unique CV positions resulting from each THM. Future studies are being prepared which provide a constant flow of air dilution using a compensation source and so no water can be injected into the EDF providing the well characterised humidity variation.