

Origin and control of ionic hydration patterns in nanopores

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Article

Keywords: artificial nanopore, control, ionic hydration shells, radial distribution function (RDF)

Posted Date: December 16th, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-124589/v1>

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Origin and control of ionic hydration patterns in nanopores

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(Dated: December 8, 2020)

In order to permeate a nanopore, an ion must overcome a dehydration energy barrier caused by the redistribution of surrounding water molecules. The redistribution is inhomogeneous, anisotropic and strongly position-dependent, resulting in complex patterns that are routinely observed in molecular dynamics simulations. We now address the questions of the physical origin of these patterns and of how they can be predicted and controlled. We introduce an analytic model able to predict the patterns in terms of experimentally accessible radial distributions functions, yielding results that agree well with molecular dynamics simulations. We show that the patterns are attributable to a complex interplay of ionic hydration shells with water layers adjacent to the membrane and with the hydration cloud of the nanopore rim atoms, and we discuss ways of controlling them. Our findings pave the way to designing required transport properties into nanoionic devices by optimising the structure of the hydration patterns.

Keywords: artificial nanopore, control, ionic hydration shells, radial distribution function (RDF)

Ionic permeation through narrow water-filled channels and pores is of profound importance in both biophysics and technology [1, 2], finding applications in fuel cells [3], biological ion channels [4], water desalination [5–8], gas [9] and isotope [10] separation, DNA sequencing [11, 12], and “blue energy” harvesting [12–14]. Ångström-sized pores in artificially fabricated membranes are promising candidates for reproducible on-demand engineering and control of selective ionic and molecular transport.

It is well-known that the structure of ionic hydration shells is one of the key factors controlling ionic permeation in nanopores [8, 15–17]. In confined geometries some of the water molecules are lost from the hydration shells, and the resultant dehydration barrier is the subject of extensive research [8, 17–28]. One outcome is an appreciation of the extraordinary complexity of the hydration patterns around an ion in the pore [18, 22, 29], as has been confirmed by numerous molecular dynamics (MD) simulations [5, 8, 22, 30, 31]. The latter reveal that the patterns are highly inhomogeneous, anisotropic and spatially clustered near membranes [32], inside nanotubes [33], and in nanoslits [16, 34]. This clustering determines the distribution of charge around the ion, the local dielectric permittivity [35, 36], and the strength of the ions’ electrostatic interactions with their surroundings [37]. However, to understand, characterise, and predict the hydration patterns theoretically is a challenging problem [2] that hitherto has remained unresolved.

We now develop an analytic model that can predict the hydration patterns of ions in nano-confinement through use of radial distribution functions (RDFs), evaluated in the bulk electrolyte. We show that the patterns result from interference between the ionic hydration shells, wa-

ter layering near the membranes and the hydration cloud around the nanopore. We compare the analytically predicted patterns with the results of MD simulations for different ionic locations near graphene nanopores with a diversity of shapes, geometries and strains. The results are applicable to narrow biological channels [24, 38, 39], functionalized sub-nanopores [24, 25, 40, 41], nanotubes [42] and nanoslits [16, 34]. Thus, this work takes an important step towards controlling the function of nanoscale devices by tailoring the hydration patterns.

Model

We consider graphene lattice [43] with nanopore and an ion (e.g. K^+) in a water box, see Fig. 1. The pore is created by removing one hexagon of carbon atoms from near the geometrical centre of the lattice.

For simplicity, we consider the carbons and the ion as being clamped. The spatial distribution of water oxygens is given by

$$\rho(\mathbf{r}_1^w | \{\mathbf{r}_m^c\}, \mathbf{r}^i) = \frac{1}{Z} \int \dots \int e^{-\beta H(\mathbf{r}_1^w, \dots, \mathbf{r}_{N_w}^w, \mathbf{p}_1^w, \dots, \mathbf{p}_{N_w}^w | \{\mathbf{r}_m^c\}, \mathbf{r}^i)} \times d\mathbf{r}_2^w \dots d\mathbf{r}_{N_w}^w d\mathbf{p}_1^w \dots d\mathbf{p}_{N_w}^w \quad (1)$$

where $H(\cdot)$ is the all-atom Hamiltonian, comprising the water-ion U^{iw} , water-lattice U^{ic} and water-water U^{ww} interactions; Z is the partition function, $\beta = 1/k_B T$, k_B is Boltzmann’s constant and T is the absolute temperature. Integration over momenta \mathbf{p}_n^w leads to a factor $(2\pi m^w k_B T)^{3N_w/2}$ which subsequently cancels out due to normalization. Here $\{\mathbf{r}_n^w\}$, $\{\mathbf{r}_m^c\}$, \mathbf{r}^{ion} represent the 3D coordinates of the water molecules, atoms of the lattice, and the ion, respectively. Water molecules can be chosen arbitrarily, and so we omit the sub-index in \mathbf{r}_1 for clarity,

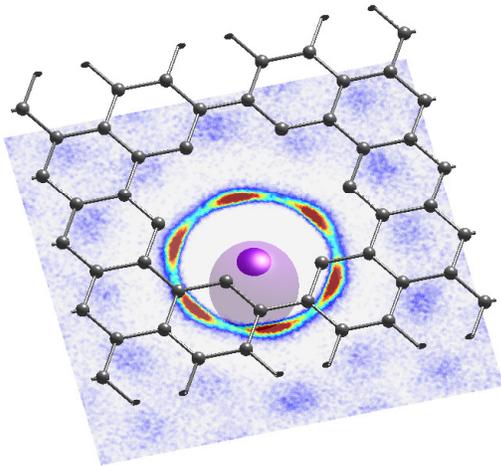


FIG. 1. Model setup. A hexagonal pore in pristine graphene (gray balls and sticks) and a K^+ ion (purple sphere) centered at $Z = -0.4\text{nm}$. The color plane represents the density pattern of water oxygen atoms in the plane at $Z = -0.28\text{nm}$. (There will be comparable colour planes at other Z values.) The colours indicate density values relative to the bulk, brown being the highest (4) and dark blue being the lowest (0) value. The density has been evaluated by MD simulation, and it is compared with theory, Eq. (4), in Fig. S1 of the Supplementary Information.

so that \mathbf{r} is used hereafter. Section 1 of the Supplementary Information (SI) provides a more detailed derivation of the quantities in this section.

Direct application of the analytic formula (1) is not feasible due to the large number of degrees of freedom in the solution. However, statistical averaging over all water molecules generates rigorously the potential of the mean force (PMF) [44–46] which can be approximated as [47, p.77]

$$W(\mathbf{r}|\{\mathbf{r}_m^c\}, \mathbf{r}^i) = \mathcal{W}^{iw}(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}^i) + \sum_m^{N^c} \mathcal{W}^{cw}(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}_m^c). \quad (2)$$

Note that the interactions of the ion or carbon atoms with other water molecules are already incorporated implicitly within the PMF. Note also that a similar strategy – construction of a multi-ion PMF from spherically-symmetrical pairwise components measured in separate MD simulations – has been used successfully in an atomic-resolution Brownian dynamics study of the ionic selectivity of α -Hemolysin [48] and to describe DNA translocation through nanopores [49].

Importantly, the water PMF is related rigorously to the correlation function \mathcal{W} (CF) via [44–46]

$$\mathcal{W}(\mathbf{r}) = -\beta^{-1} \ln g(\mathbf{r}), \quad (3)$$

assuming that $\mathcal{W} \rightarrow 0$ and $g(\mathbf{r}) \rightarrow 1$ as $\mathbf{r} \rightarrow \infty$. We evaluate the RDFs in bulk through separate MD simulations

(see SI). Note that this needs to be done only once for a given density ρ_0 and temperature T [50].

The relations (2) and (3) allow one to rewrite the water spatial density $\rho(\mathbf{r})$ in the form

$$\frac{\rho(\mathbf{r}|\{\mathbf{r}_m^c\}, \mathbf{r}^i)}{\rho_0} = g^{iw}(|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}^i|) \cdot \prod_m^{N^c} g^{cw}(|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}_m^c|). \quad (4)$$

where ρ_0 is the bulk water density (see SI for details). Note that the modulus sign reduces the 3D ion-water and carbon-water interactions to ion-oxygen and carbon-oxygen interactions, respectively. Thus, one is relying on the *radial* density functions (RDFs) $g(r)$ which are one-dimensional functions of distance, in contrast to three-dimensional CFs.

In the derivation we take no explicit account of water-water interactions, in particular between their oxygen atoms. This simplification leads to the water being represented as an ideal gas, and it overestimates the water density near the graphene walls. This can clearly be seen near the graphene lattice in the lower panels of Fig. 2.

Equation (4) allows one to compute the density of the water wetting a given set of atoms as a product of component RDFs, and to evaluate the water PMF via the Boltzmann inversion (3). Equation (4) also shows that the water pattern results from interference between the ionic hydration shells (g^{iw} term) and the water layers surrounding the graphene membrane ($\prod g^{cw}$ term). Equation (4) represents the well-known Kirkwood superposition approximation [50, 51], [52, p.186]. It has also been generalized to describe the ice-water interface [50]. Here, we apply this relation for the first time to describe the water density patterns around an ion near an artificial nanopore.

The usefulness of an approach based on Eq. (4) is twofold. First, use of the *bulk* RDF values to describe water density near the pore, provides for a $10^2 - 10^4$ speed-up in comparison with all-atom MD simulations [50]. In turn, the single-component *bulk* RDFs $g(r)$ can be obtained in a number of ways. The most straightforward is to use experimental values derived from the structure factor measured by X-ray [53] or neutron [54] diffraction. Thus one can avoid uncertainties related to the properties of the force field (parametrization, polarizability) and thus connect the experimentally-measurable structural properties of the bulk electrolyte solution with those near a nanopore. Other approaches rely on MD, Monte-Carlo or DFT simulations, or on the integral theory of liquids [46, 55–58]. In the present work, MD-derived RDFs have been chosen in order to simplify the comparison between the MD simulations and analytics.

Secondly, the method can be readily extended to any material or pore geometry. The latter paves the way towards changing the pore parameters – size, shape, number of layers, strain tensor, rim charge, functional groups) and choice of lattice type (e.g. MoS_2 , hBN, WS_2 , etc. as

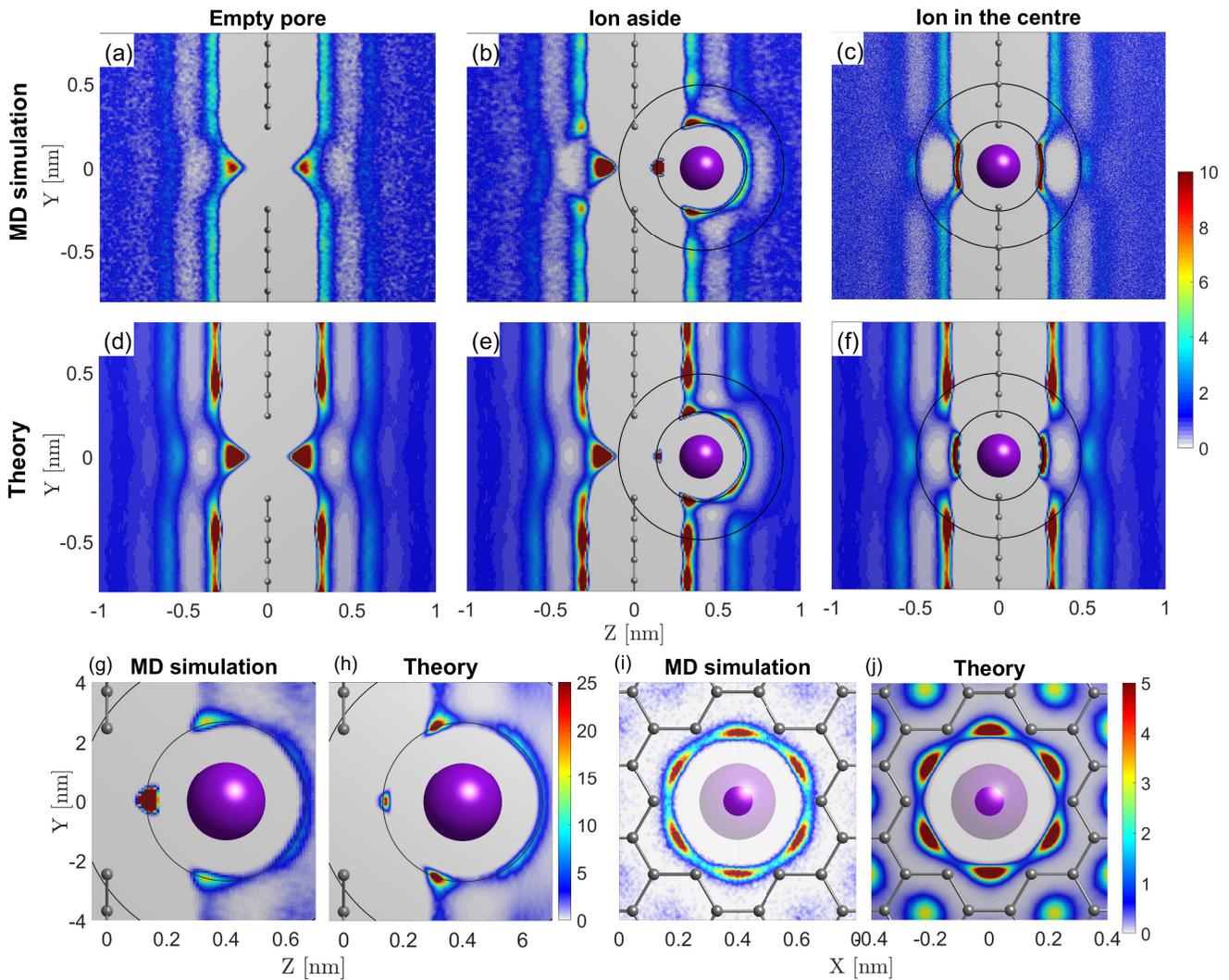


FIG. 2. Comparison of analytic theory with MD simulations. The graphene sheet is shown in section by the vertical line of carbon atoms, in which the pore appears as a centrally-placed gap with horizontal axis of symmetry. The O^- density in the vicinity of an ion (purple sphere) near the pore, derived from the MD simulations (a)-(c) is compared with the predictions of Eq. (4) (d)-(f). Panels (a) and (d) show the oxygen density around an empty pore; (c) and (f) show the density for a K^+ ion in the centre of the pore; (b) and (e) show the density when the ion is centred 0.4nm from the entrance to the pore. The fine structure of the oxygen density pattern around a K^+ ion at the pore centre, obtained from MD simulations (g,i) and from theory Eq. (4) (h,j). The concentric black circles represent the first two maxima of the K^+-O^- RDF, and are given as guides to the eye. The graphene lattice is indicated in a grey ball-and-stick representation.

well as graphene) – with the purpose of changing the dehydration pattern. The pattern defines the dehydration energy profile and thus determines the pore’s permeability and selectivity, which are vital for inverse-designing the function of Ångström-scale ionic devices. Below we illustrate this point by comparing results from MD with those from theory (Eq. (4)).

Molecular dynamics simulation results

Fig. 2 compares the MD results (top row) with the corresponding theoretical predictions, Eq. (4) (middle row). They agree well in that the qualitative features of the water distributions are well reproduced: as described by the

$\prod g^{iw}$ term in Eq. (4), superposition of the contributions from all the carbon atoms results in a decaying plane density wave in the z -direction, matching the troughs and peaks of the C-OH RDFs: see Fig. S2 of the SI. The presence of the pore in an otherwise intact lattice distorts the water layers near the membrane, and allows water molecules to exist in the pore as revealed by the strength of their distribution.

An ion in the pore, Fig. 2(c), suggests spherically-symmetric spatial density waves, as implied by the term g^{iw} in Eq. (4). The resultant superposition of the plane wave from the graphene with the spherically-symmetrical

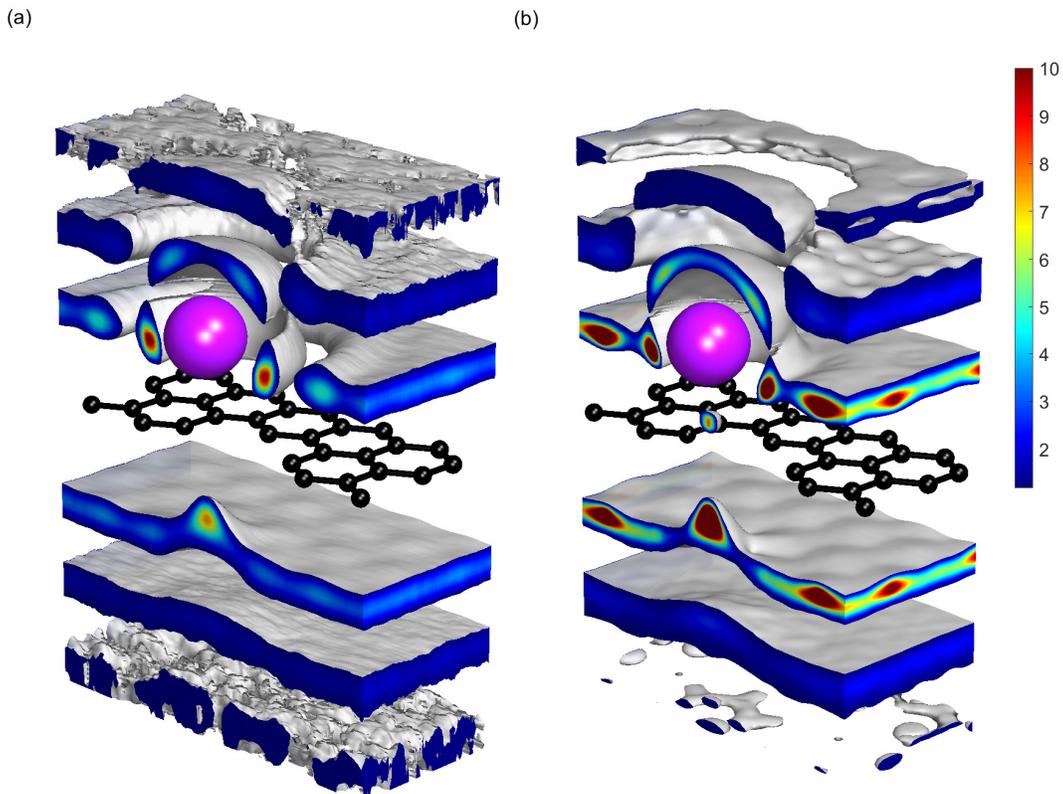


FIG. 3. Three-dimensional water distribution around a K^+ ion (purple sphere) at $Z = 0.4\text{nm}$ near the pore in a graphene lattice (black ball-and-stick representation), obtained from (a) MD simulations and (b) theory, Eq. (4). An isovalue of 1.15 was chosen to reveal the layered structure of the hydration around the ion and the graphene lattice. Both panels have been smoothed with a 5-point window.

hydration shells from the ion leads to a reshaping of the density such that the first hydration shell, while partially remaining, becomes significantly altered. In particular, it acquires maxima where the O-C and O- K^+ RDF maxima coincide, minima when both RDFs reach minima, and mid-values where the maximum of one RDF overlaps with the minimum of another. Circular waves in Fig. 2 (b,c,e,f) around the ion correspond to the first two maxima of the intact bulk O- K^+ RDF, indicated by the concentric circles at their respective radii. The density around the centrally-located ion preserves the first hydration shell, but with a modulation due to the graphene atoms; the structure of the second shell is significantly affected by interactions with carbon atoms. Thus, the observed water patterns arise from interference between the ionic hydration shell and the hydration cloud around the nanopore. Analysis of the hydration patterns around an Na^+ ion, shown in Fig. S4 of the SI, reveals similar features.

The central parts of Fig. 2(b) and (e) are shown at higher resolution in panels (g) and (h). One can see the fine structure in the water density pattern resulting from the superposition of the ion-oxygen and carbon-oxygen

interactions. The density crescent at $Z \approx -0.25\text{nm}$ in Fig. 2 (g) and (h) is induced by the first maximum of the RDF, as indicated by the concentric circles, while the two peaks appear due to the oxygen interaction with the carbon atoms. The low-density area around $[-4, 0]$ emerges due to the minimum of the K^+-O^- RDF located at around 0.35 nm . The “island” around $[0.175, 0]\text{nm}$ indicates the position of the trapped water molecule, and highlights the predictive power of the proposed analytical method (see SI for more details). The cross-sections of the crescents in Fig. 2 (g) and (h), made at 0.25 nm , are shown in panels (i) and (j). These arise from an interplay between the oxygen-ion and oxygen-pore interactions: the minimum at the origin arises due to the convex shape of the first hydration shell near the ion, while the hexagonal structure is inherited from the hexagonal geometry of the graphene pore (gray balls and sticks). Similar water density patterns in the plane of the nanopores have been observed in numerous MD simulation works [8, 17, 18, 22, 30] recently.

Figure 3 combines the previous results by illustrating the 3D isosurfaces of the hydration shells around the ion and the pore, taken at a level of 1.15. Panels (a) and

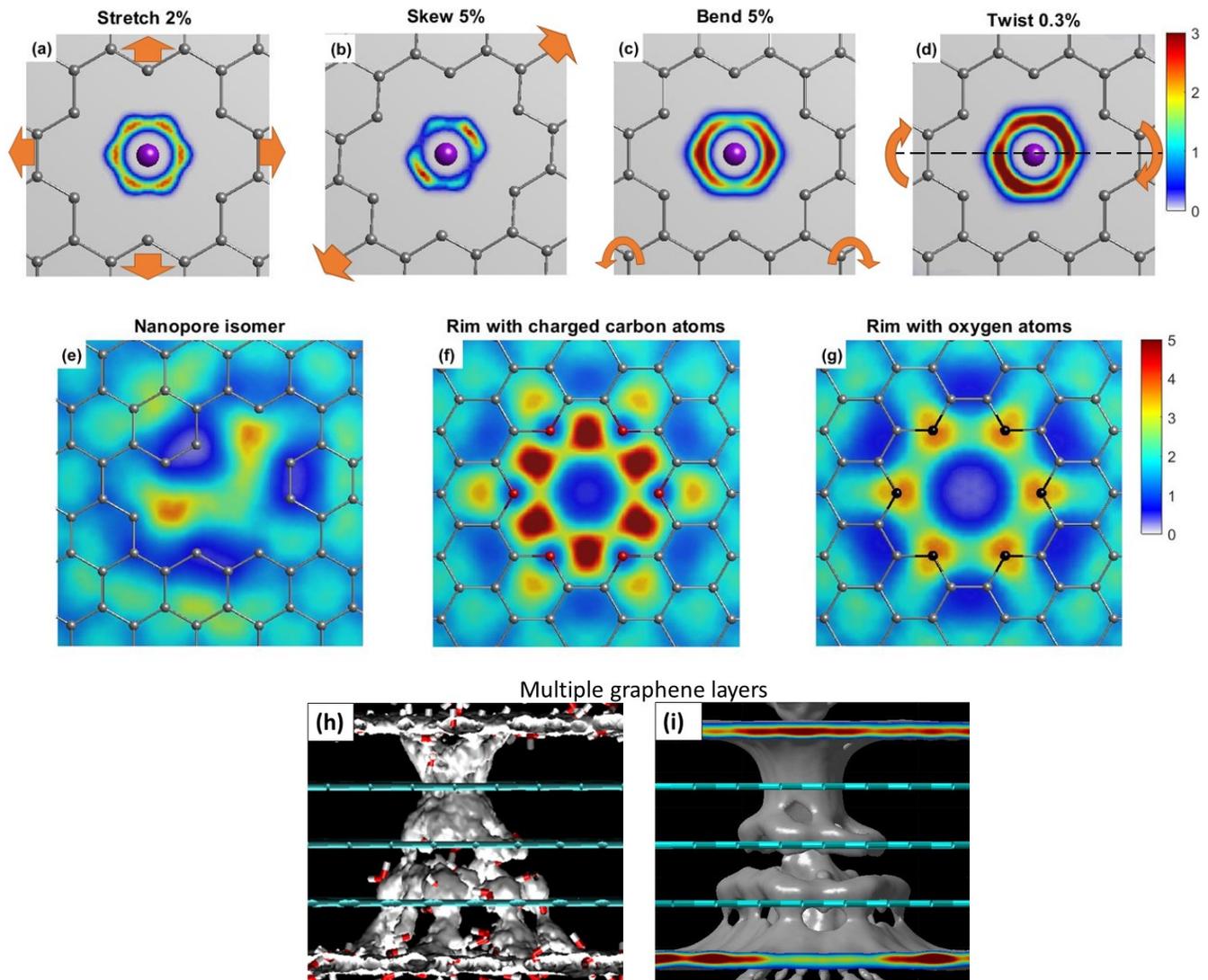


FIG. 4. Tools to control the hydration pattern include the extrinsic processes of: (a) stretching, (b) skewing or asymmetric stretching, (c) bending, (d) twisting, and the intrinsic features of – (e) choice of pore isomer, (f) charging of the rim atoms, (g) functionalising the rim with oxygen atoms, (h) use of a multi-layer pore (MD simulation [59]), and (i) theoretical prediction, Eq. (4). Density slices have been taken at $Z = -0.23$ nm (a-d) and $Z = -0.28$ nm (e-g). Panel (h) has been adapted from [59] with permission of Elsevier.

(b) show that the results from MD and theoretical prediction Eq. (4), respectively, agree well. These figures reproduce the layering of water near the graphene sheet, with first three layers visible (see SI for details), as well as the spherical hydration shells around the K^+ ion. Parts of the preserved 1st and 2nd hydration shells are clearly evident. The figure emphasises the inhomogeneity and anisotropy of the water patterns emerging from the combined effects of the ion and the graphene lattice. The origin of multiple water layers is illustrated in Fig. S5 of the SI.

We have also studied how the hydration structure evolves as the ion's position changes. The results are summarised in Fig. S6 and the two frame series (*movie1*

and *movie2*) in the SI. This set clearly illustrates that the water structure is significantly modified, even when the ion is located more than 1 nm away from the nanopore. In other words, when the lattice- (hydration layers) and ion-induced (hydration shells) inhomogeneities begin to overlap, the ion-pore interaction starts to change. This result supports the notion that solvent-mediated interactions extend the range of the interactions with the pore by a large factor compared with the bare ion radius [60].

Finally, in Fig. 4 we illustrate the predicted effects of the set of tools that we propose for controlling the dehydration pattern. They can be categorized into two groups. The first set is *extrinsic* and includes (a) stretching, (b) skewing or asymmetrical stretching, (c) bending,

and (d) twisting of the lattice. Secondly, we propose adjustments of some *intrinsic* features: (e) the nanopore geometry, (f) rim charge, (g) atom type and (i) layer number. Our theory yields good agreement with the published crown-like water density patterns (panel (h)) from Ref.[61]. More examples of these tools in action are given in section 3 of the SI.

It is evident that Eq. (4) can reproduce well the qualitative features of the water distribution near the pore given in Figs. 2. We point out, however, that there is a numerical discrepancy – a factor of ~ 3 – between the peak values of the maps, clearly seen between the MD-generated and theoretical density of the “ridges” near the graphene lattice. We attribute this discrepancy to our omission of the water-water interactions in Eq. (4), which would imply an absence of short-range repulsion between oxygen or hydrogen atoms of separate water molecules, so that arbitrarily small separations can be realised. The consequence is a denser water distribution, localized near the carbon atoms. Also, the reduction from a full 3D model to the radial CF picture overlooks the water-water relative orientations and thus limits the applicability of the method in carbon nanotubes. We are currently working on eliminating these shortcomings of the technique by using higher-dimensional CFs [50].

Discussion

Our approach can readily be extended to account for the density of hydrogen atoms, and thus to evaluate the average charge density in the domain. Doing so promises deep insight into water-mediated interactions, including the pore rim’s hydration [62] and reorientation of the water dipoles in confinement which reduces [63, 64] the dielectric permittivity. The latter is needed for quantifying the ion and polymer interactions with the pore and with the external electric field and for understanding the ionic diffusivity [65] in biological channels, as well as the properties of the electric double layer [66, 67]. The method can also be used to define the demarcation interface between the pore and the protein in continuous theories of ion transport such as the Poisson-Nernst-Planck (PNP) theory [68]. The method can thus provide fundamental insights into the electrostatics and dynamics of ions in sub-nanopores, where the dielectric properties on the nanoscale remain a challenging unsolved problem and a subject of intensive research [35, 36, 69, 70].

Our results demonstrate the applicability of the method to describing water density patterns under quite general conditions, e.g. for arbitrary ionic positions, pore geometry (size, shape, number of layers, offset eclipse [71]), stretching, skewing, bending, twisting of the lattice, and the type of atom around the rim of the pore. This opens the way to multi-parameter optimization [72] of the energy landscape by adjustment of the corresponding hydration patterns. For example, by iteratively choosing the most appropriate combination of

pore geometric parameters, and subsequently manipulating the pore shape externally (e.g. by stretching), the nanopore’s permeability and selectivity can be optimised and regulated, providing for permeation along specified pathways [73–75]. The same strategy should serve to slow down the translocation and guide the orientation of DNA, which constitutes one of the current challenges to fast genome sequencing [11]. Thus, the proposed method paves the way to the optimisation and design of novel nanoionic devices in many contexts and application [76].

Conclusions

We have proposed and validated an analytic method for revealing and quantifying the hydration patterns around an ion near a sub-nanopore, using a product of the radial density functions (RDFs) measured in the bulk electrolyte. The complexity and fragmentation of these patterns result from interference between ionic hydration shells and the hydration cloud around the nanopore. The method can be extended to account for the distribution of hydrogen atoms, and hence to obtain insight into local electrostatic interactions on the nanoscale. It is fast, and it allows one to take explicit account of the nanopore’s detailed geometry (size, length, shape, number of layers, offset eclipse), pore constituents (charge and atom type), and of the ion’s position, as well as implicitly to take account of the ion type, solvent, temperature, and pressure. Multi-parameter optimization of the pore parameters and surroundings is expected to create a way of engineering and regulating the energy barrier in nanopores via control of the hydration pattern. This strategy opens a new avenue to designing, optimising, and controlling the permeability and selectivity properties of nanoionic devices, as well as regulating the translocation of DNA through solid-state nanopore sequencers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to N. D. Drummond, B. Luan, A. Stefanovska and N. G. Stocks for valuable discussions. The work was partially supported by a PhD Scholarship from the Faculty of Science and Technology of Lancaster University, by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council UK (grants EP/M016889/1 and EP/M015831/1), and by a Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant RPG-2017-134. MLB, CG, WATG, DGL and PVEMcC gratefully acknowledge the use of the High End Computing facility at Lancaster University. AS gratefully acknowledges support from the Materials Genome Initiative.

DISCLAIMER

Certain commercial equipment, instruments, or materials are identified in this paper in order to specify the experimental procedure adequately. Such identification is not intended to imply recommendation or endorsement by NIST, nor is it intended to imply that the materials or equipment identified are necessarily the best available for the purpose.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

M.B., A.S. and D.L. conceived the central ideas. M.B. developed the theory, devised and implemented the analysis software. M.B., D.L., W.G. and at the early stage C.G. designed and performed MD simulations. P.V.E.McC. oversaw the project, discussed the results, and helped with the manuscript. All authors discussed the results, contributed to the writing and editing of the manuscript, and approved the final version.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Supplementary Information is available for this paper.

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Figures

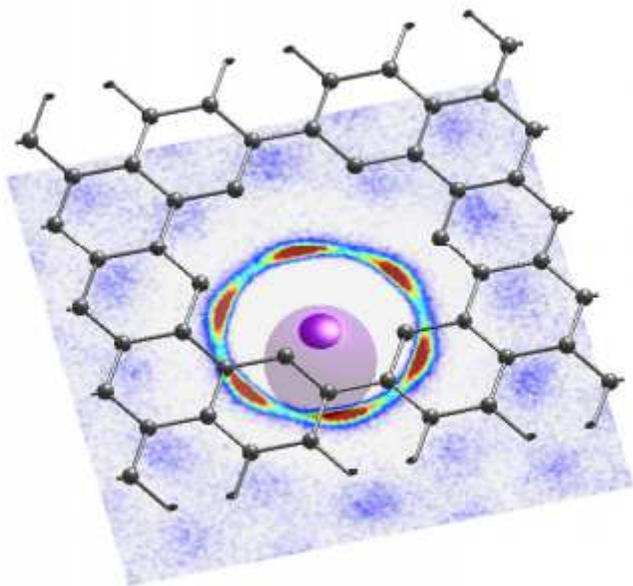


Figure 1

Model setup. A hexagonal pore in pristine graphene (gray balls and sticks) and a K^+ ion (purple sphere) centered at $Z = -0.4\text{nm}$. The color plane represents the density pattern of water oxygen atoms in the plane at $Z = -0.28\text{nm}$. (There will be comparable colour planes at other Z values.) The colours indicate density values relative to the bulk, brown being the highest (4) and dark blue being the lowest (0) value. The density has been evaluated by MD simulation, and it is compared with theory, Eq. (4), in Fig. S1 of the Supplementary Information.

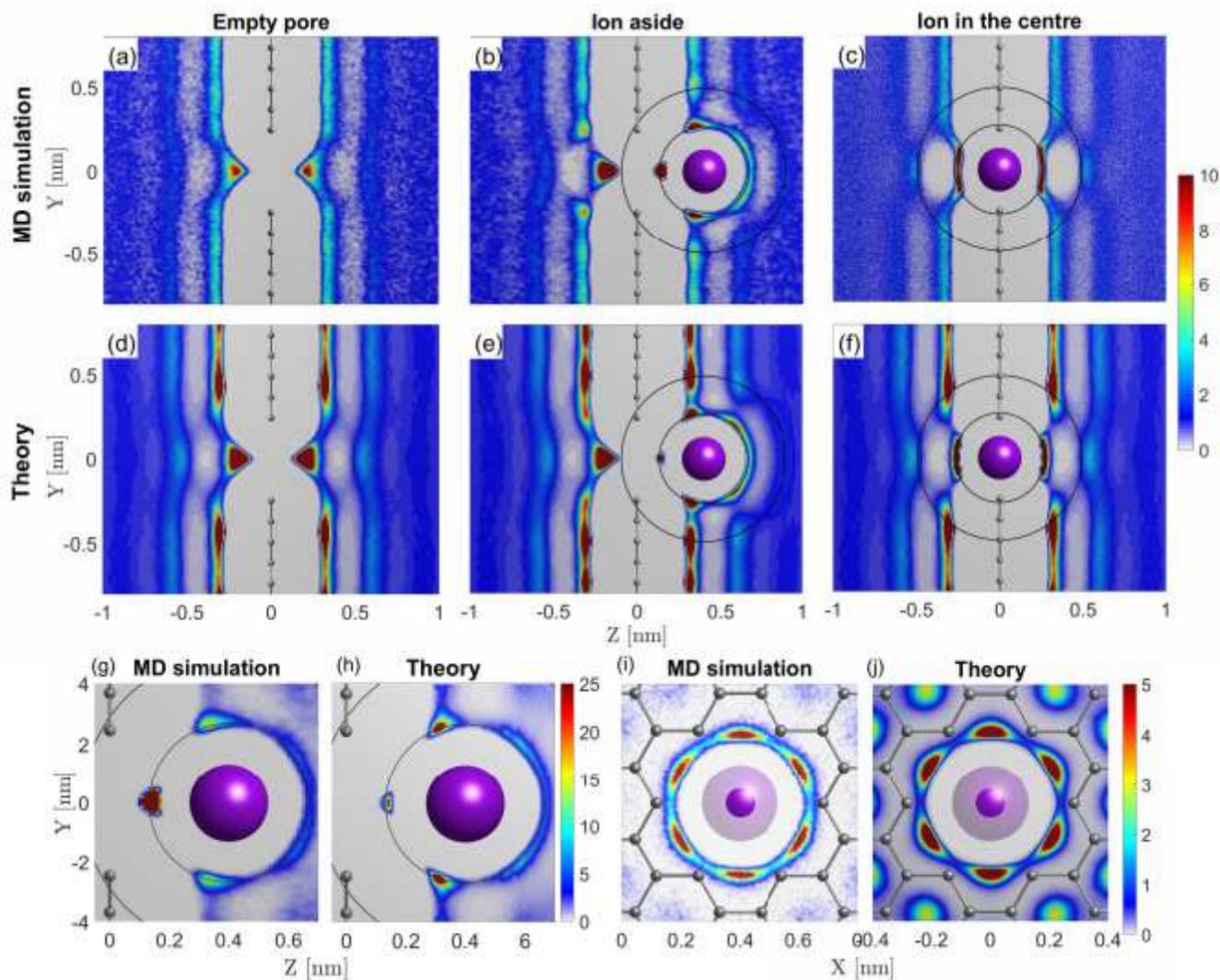


Figure 2

Comparison of analytic theory with MD simulations. The graphene sheet is shown in section by the vertical line of carbon atoms, in which the pore appears as a centrally-placed gap with horizontal axis of symmetry. The O^- density in the vicinity of an ion (purple sphere) near the pore, derived from the MD simulations (a)-(c) is compared with the predictions of Eq. (4) (d)-(f). Panels (a) and (d) show the oxygen density around an empty pore; (c) and (f) show the density for a K^+ ion in the centre of the pore; (b) and (e) show the density when the ion is centred 0.4 nm from the entrance to the pore. The fine structure of the oxygen density pattern around a K^+ ion at the pore centre, obtained from MD simulations (g,i) and from theory Eq. (4) (h,j). The concentric black circles represent the first two maxima of the K^+-O^- RDF, and are given as guides to the eye. The graphene lattice is indicated in a grey ball-and-stick representation.

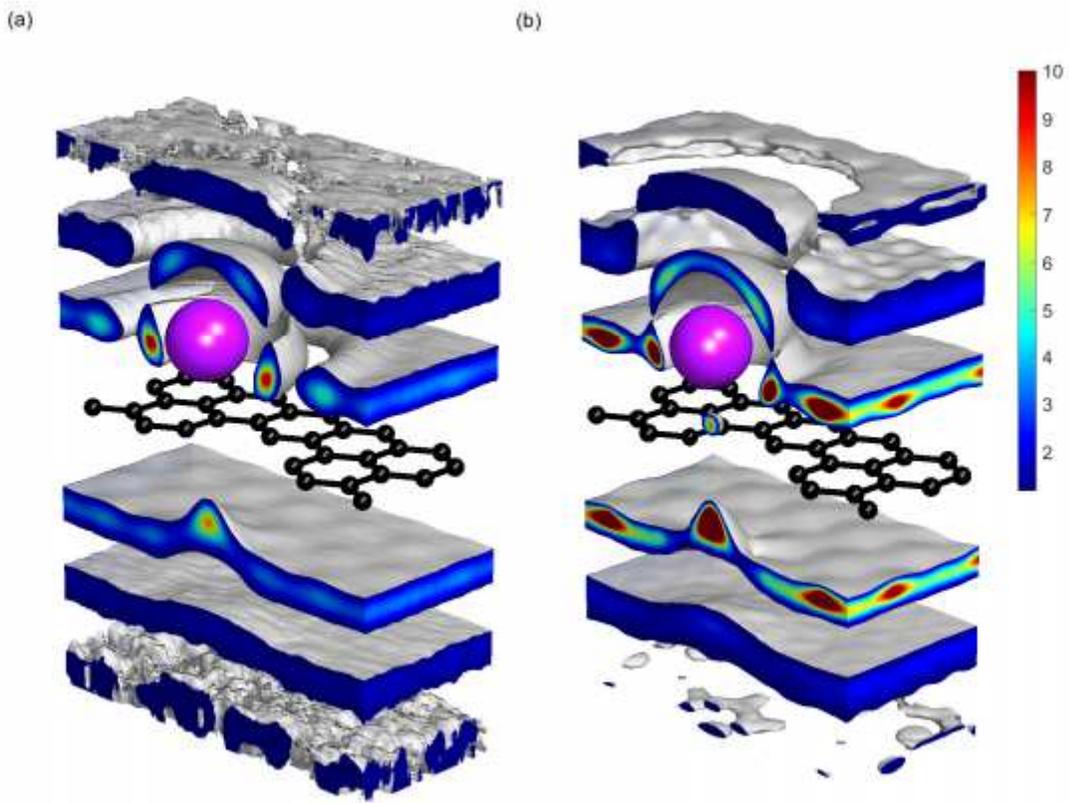


Figure 3

Three-dimensional water distribution around a K⁺ ion (purple sphere) at $Z = 0.4\text{nm}$ near the pore in a graphene lattice (black ball-and-stick representation), obtained from (a) MD simulations and (b) theory, Eq. (4). An isovalue of 1.15 was chosen to reveal the layered structure of the hydration around the ion and the graphene lattice. Both panels have been smoothed with a 5-point window.

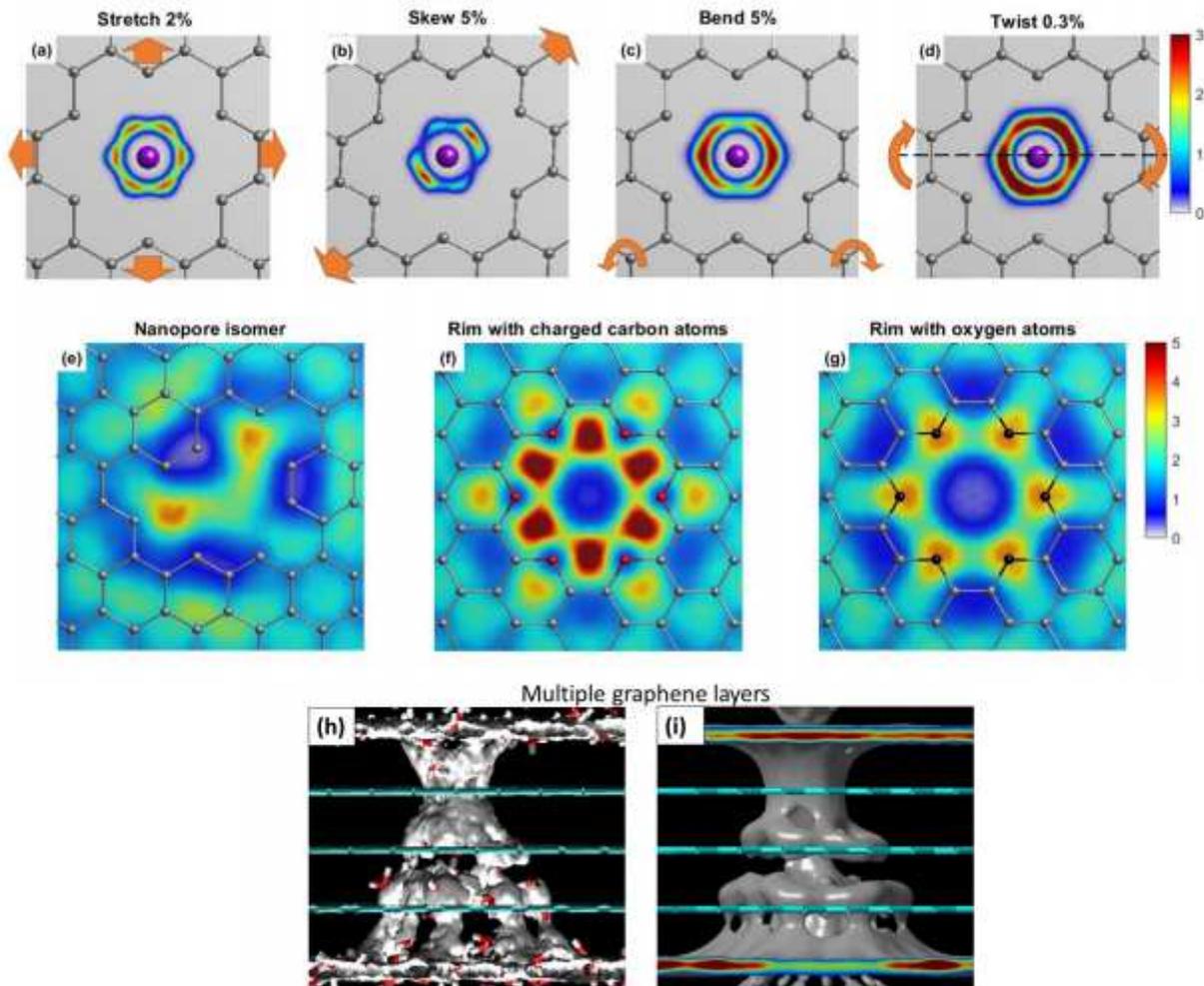


Figure 4

Tools to control the hydration pattern include the extrinsic processes of: (a) stretching, (b) skewing or asymmetric stretching, (c) bending, (d) twisting, and the intrinsic features of – (e) choice of pore isomer, (f) charging of the rim atoms, (g) functionalising the rim with oxygen atoms, (h) use of a multi-layer pore (MD simulation [59], and (i) theoretical prediction, Eq. (4). Density slices have been taken at $Z = -0.23$ nm (a-d) and $Z = -0.28$ nm (e-g). Panel (h) has been adapted from [59] with permission of Elsevier.

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