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## ABSTRACT

The explosive growth of single-molecule techniques is transforming our understanding of biology, helping to develop new physics inspired by emergent biological processes, and leading to emerging areas of nanotechnology. Key biological and chemical processes can now be probed with new levels of detail, one molecule at a time, from the nanoscopic dynamics of nature's molecular machines to an ever-expanding range of exciting applications across multiple length and time scales. Their common feature is an ability to render the underlying distribution of molecular properties that ensemble averaging masks and to reveal new insights into complex systems containing spatial and temporal heterogeneity. Small fluorescent probes are among the most adaptable and versatile for single-molecule sensing applications because they provide high signal-to-noise ratios combined with excellent specificity of labeling when chemically attached to target biomolecules or embedded within a host material. In this review, we examine recent advances in probe designs, their utility, and applications and provide a practical guide to their use, focusing on the single-molecule detection of nucleic acids, proteins, carbohydrates, and membrane dynamics. We also present key challenges that must be overcome to perform successful single-molecule experiments, including probe conjugation strategies, identify tradeoffs and limitations for each probe design, showcase emerging applications, and discuss exciting future directions for the community.



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## I. BACKGROUND

Single-molecule sensing techniques are revolutionizing our understanding of biological systems by enabling the molecular building blocks of life to be studied with extraordinary levels of detail,[1] new soft-matter physics relevant to complex processes to be explored, and new physics theories to be developed.[2] The last several decades have witnessed an explosive growth in the use of small nanoscale fluorescent probes for investigating biomolecular structure and function under a huge range of experimental conditions. It is now abundantly clear that a capability to measure fluorescence intensity, absorption, quantum yield, spectrum, lifetime, correlation time, and anisotropy from single probes *in situ, in vitro,* and *in vivo*, with associated growth in new analytical tools,[3] enables researchers to access population distributions that are otherwise hidden by the ensemble average. While x-ray crystallography and electron microscopy tools have, for example, provided important structural details of biomolecular systems, they lack the ability to follow the time-sequence of corresponding dynamics and often miss critical interactions or transient conformations because of the requirement for static, frozen, or powdered samples. Fully characterizing biological dynamics and accessing micro-environmental distributions thus requires an ability to follow individual interactions without averaging over all steps in the process, enabling the study of

the physics of life in effect one molecule at a time.[4] In this respect, the emergence of single-molecule fluorescence methods has led to transformative insights into cases where static and/or dynamic heterogeneity is present, such as in a biological machine whose properties continuously and dynamically alter over multiple time scales. For all of nature's biomolecules, a variety of chemical and physical events trigger time-dependent conformational switching and interactions, and accessing how they dynamically operate is extremely attractive for researchers across the physical-life sciences interface.

Although some biomolecules contain weakly fluorescing units, for example in proteins the aromatic amino acids (tryptophan, tyrosine and phenylalanine), advances in modern synthesis techniques have enabled highly emissive fluorescent probes to be chemically tagged to biomolecular structures with high specificity. Since the earliest detection of single pentacene molecules at low temperatures,[5,6] techniques which enable fluorescence detection from small probes tagged to target biomolecules under physiological environments have developed rapidly and been applied extensively, as approximated by the abundance of research papers with "single-molecule fluorescence" in the article. Although this is clearly a simple analysis, the number of such papers per year, shown in Fig. 1(a), demonstrates that the field has more than doubled in size since a similar analysis was carried out over a decade ago.[7]

The visualization of these single-molecule fluorescent probes has primarily enabled the localization and diffusion of single biomolecules to be observed directly,[8] but more complex interactions such as protein dynamics,[9–11] folding kinetics,[12–14] and stoichiometry and kinetics of functional enzymes and molecular machines inside living cells,[15–18] can also now be followed through changes to their spectroscopic fingerprints. Their utility has also extended to environmental sensing, enabling the organization and architecture of lipid membranes[19–21] and signaling complexes on the surfaces of living cells[22,23] to be explored. In addition to aiding visualization, these probes have become indispensable to the modern researcher because they also provide dynamic information concerning the quantity of the localized biomolecule in diffraction-limited volumes.

Another powerful application rests in Förster resonance energy transfer (FRET) experiments,[24] where donor and acceptor probes are tagged to key molecular components of a biological system, and changes in their fluorescence properties (intensity and lifetime) report quantitatively on their separation distance with a ∼1–10 nm sensitivity.[25] Widely considered as a spectroscopic nano-ruler, FRET has become a popular workhorse technique for identifying and characterizing real-time conformational changes within single nucleic acids[26–28] proteins[29] and enzymes,[30] and recent probe developments[25] have seen it combined with integrative modeling, giving rise to a new field of quantitative structural biology.[31–33]

Fluorescent probes have also found utility in experiments tailored toward sub-millisecond temporal resolution,[34] and they are providing new opportunities for linking heterogeneous transfer dynamics with thermal fluctuations in biological structures.[35] Another interesting application is the real-time measurement of orientations of single molecules using polarized emission. Here, the probes emit polarized light along the axis of their transition dipole moments and if, for example, the polarized fluorescence emission intensity is measured as a function of the excitation polarization, then this allows for quantification of the probe's local orientation and rotational characteristics.[36] The methodology has already been applied to the understanding of intercalators,[37] probing biomolecular conformation under tension,[38,39] following rotational dynamics within membranes[40] and has facilitated investigations into tilting during processive motility,[41] with new methods capable of correlating fluorescence polarization with super-resolved localization precision.[42]

As demonstrated in Fig. 1(b), the demand for, and applications of, small fluorescent probes is growing considerably. In nearly all applications, the combination of photon statistics and physical laws quantitatively describes the behavior of single tagged biomolecules at work, enabling researchers to pinpoint key pathways and mechanisms which underpin the physics of life.[4] This ability undoubtedly places single-molecule fluorescence techniques at the forefront of the physical-life sciences interface.[43]

This review highlights advances in the development of fluorescent probes for single-molecule imaging and spectroscopy applications, focusing on those that can resolve spatial and temporal dynamics of individual biomolecules at work. As the number of successful fluorescent reporters increases, several design trends and considerations are becoming apparent. We highlight the most robust and adaptable of these designs and showcase their utility in the context of single-molecule fluorescence experiments.

## II. EMERGING FLUORESCENT PROBE DESIGNS

Single-molecule fluorescence studies generally make use of extrinsic probes that are either specifically linked to a target biomolecule, nonspecifically intercalated into its structure, or embedded within a host matrix. They span the visible spectrum, as well as extending into the ultraviolet and near-infrared, and can be coupled to almost any biomolecule of interest, from nucleic acids and proteins, to carbohydrates, and lipids. A huge variety of probes now exist, and each has its own unique photophysical properties. However, great care must be taken to choose an appropriate label for each application since it is vital to maximize the signal-to-noise ratio detected from each individual molecule. The selection of a suitable probe with robust enough photophysical properties is, thus, a critical first step in the experimental design process.

In general, the probes should satisfy four major conditions. First, they should display excellent photophysics within the biomolecule's local environment. They should be water soluble, have an ability to strongly absorb excitation photons (extinction coefficient, $\varepsilon$, $>50\,000$ $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$) and be sufficiently emissive (quantum yield, $\phi$, $> 0.1$) for the desired spatiotemporal resolution.[24] Additionally, the probes should not aggregate in solution and remain photoactive across the duration of the measurement time window (photobleaching quantum yield, $\phi_{pb} < 10^{-6}$–$10^{-7}$).[44,45] Second, they should contain a linker for high specificity or demonstrate ease-of-delivery toward the biomolecule of interest. Third, they must also minimize any putative impairment to biological function due to steric hindrance effects. This is often carefully checked by comparing the activity of the labeled species with its unlabeled counterpart. Finally, and in the context of ratiometric FRET-based measurements, the chosen fluorophores should have large spectral separation between their emissions, have similar quantum yields, and must not exhibit time-dependent spectral shifts or intensity fluctuations.[24,46] In this section, we focus the discussion on the most popular small molecule fluorescent probe designs which

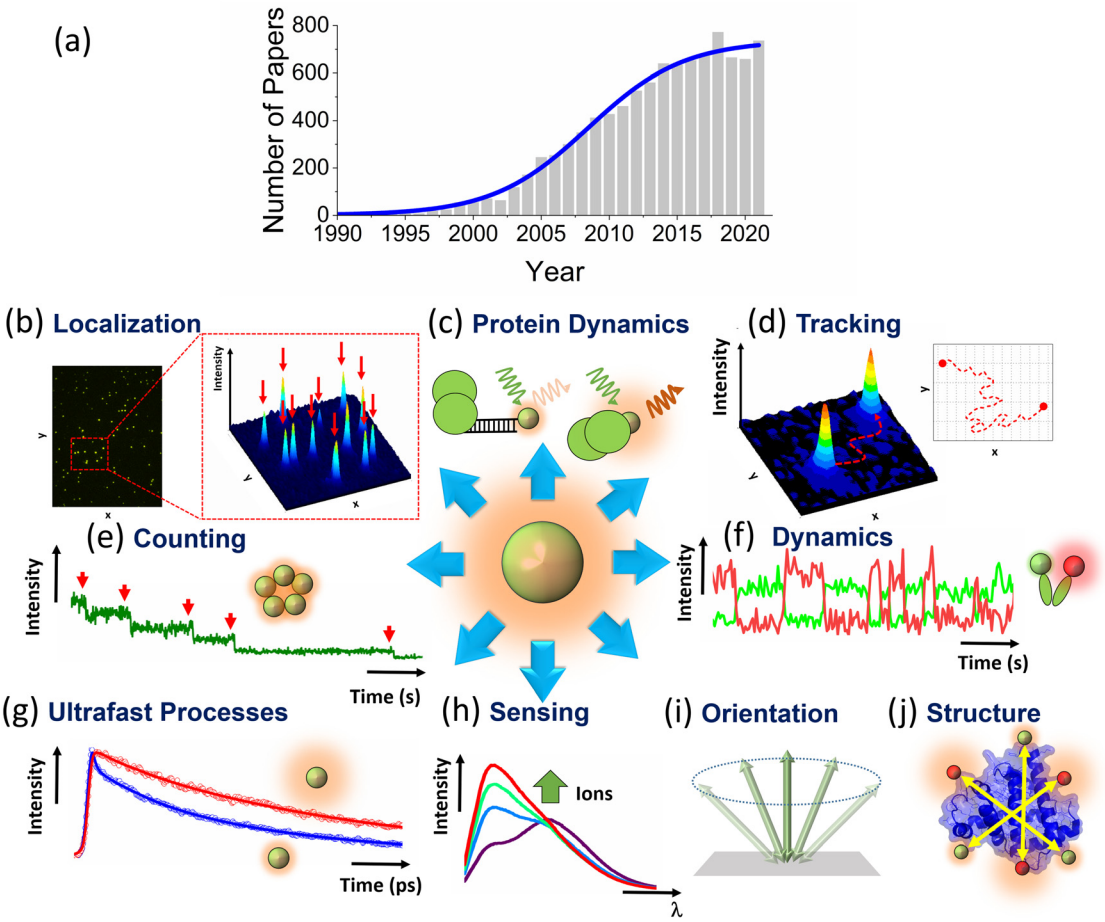


**FIG. 1.** Small molecule fluorescent probes enable quantification of biological interactions and dynamics. (a) The number of papers indexed in the PubMed database with single molecule fluorescence in the article illustrates the growth of the field. [(b)–(j)] Single-molecule fluorescence techniques provide quantitative information on a wide range of parameters. For example, (b) by following raw image acquisition from small molecule fluorescent probes, the intensity profile of each molecule may be modeled to reveal the probe's location with nanometer precision if the number of emitted photons per probe is typically $>10^7$. (c) The binding of a protein to a small molecule probe may in some cases lead to fluorescence enhancement. The protein-induced enhancement is a particularly powerful approach for probing protein dynamics upon interaction with nucleic acids. (d) By capturing images as a function of time, 2D correlation maps documenting all detected probe locations can be used for particle tracking. (e) Under continuous excitation, each fluorescently tagged sub-unit within a complex photobleaches causing a stepwise fluorescence decrease in approximately equal magnitude steps. The number of active fluorophores, and therefore number of photobleaching steps, yields the complex stoichiometry. (f) Anti-correlations in the fluorescence time traces of donor- (green) and acceptor- (red) labeled complexes enable nanoscale molecular dynamics to be accessed via FRET. (g) Fluorescence decay curves obtained via time-correlated single photon counting techniques reveal lifetime distributions and interconversion rates reflecting biomolecular conformations and environments. (h) Fluorescence emission spectra of various probes shift in response to changes in the local biomolecular environment, enabling accurate determination of, for example, local ion concentrations. (i) Polarization microscopy enables rotational and orientational behaviors to be extracted from single probes. Here, the orientation of a probe's dipole moment rotating about an axis can be determined; the dipole is only efficiently excited when it rotates through the axis of the excitation polarization. (j) FRET analysis captures the structure of single biomolecules, with distance errors reported to be as low as only a few percent.

satisfy these conditions, including recent advances, emerging trends, their use, and relative performance.

### A. Organic dyes

Organic dyes are among the smallest in length scale (<1 nm) and most adaptable of all small molecule probe designs. When properly positioned, they are generally considered among the least invasive and perturbing. Their structure facilitates electron delocalization through a conjugated $\pi$-electron system, enabling the molecule to act as an efficient electric dipole. Organic dyes used for single-molecule fluorescence studies typically absorb and emit across the visible region of the electromagnetic spectrum; though, due to issues with photostability with dyes that absorb below 450 nm, and limitations regarding detection sensitivity at infrared wavelengths, most single-molecule fluorescence experiments involve organic dyes that cover the 480–750 nm window.[47,48]

Organic dyes are broadly classified into six major families: the cyanines, oxazines, boron-dipyrromethenes (BODIPYs), perylenes, diketopyrrolopyrroles (DPPs), and xanthenes, with the latter

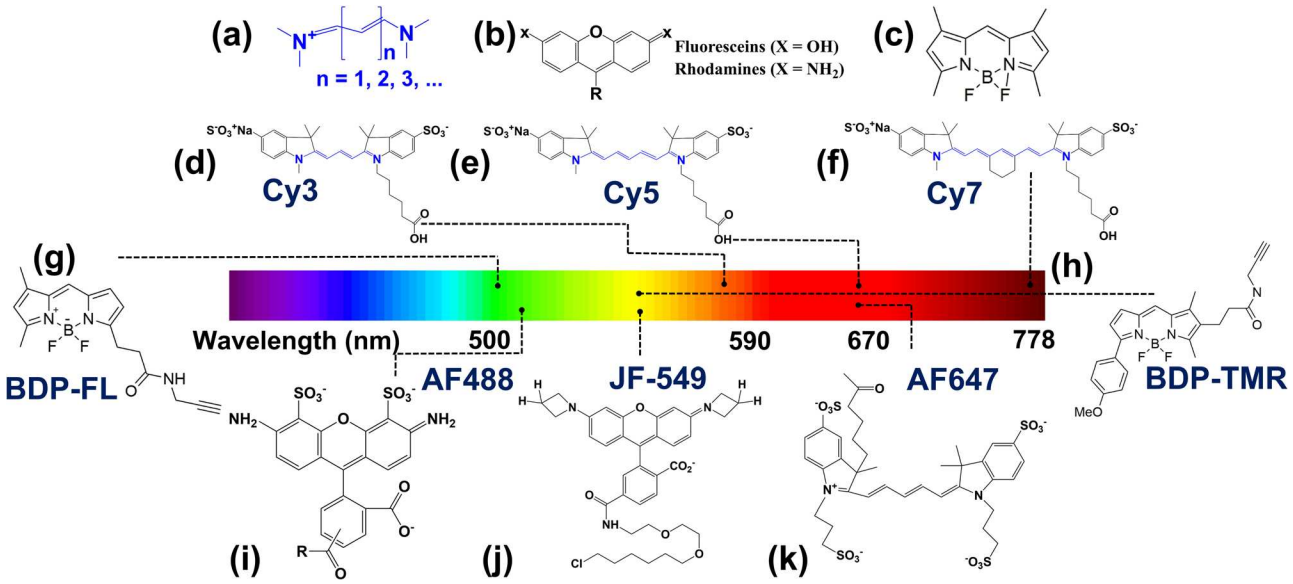


**FIG. 2.** Chemical structures of commonly used organic dyes for single-molecule sensing applications. The general chemical structures of (a) cyanines, (b) fluoresceins and rhodamines, and (c) BODIPYs. Also shown are the chemical structures of (d) Cy3, (e) Cy5, (f) Cy7, (g) BDP-FL, (h) BDP-TMR, (i) AF488, (j) JF-549, and (k) AF647. Dotted lines indicate the peak emission wavelength of each probe design.

consisting of particularly popular fluorescein and rhodamine derivatives, such as the ATTO dyes.

The cyanines have the general structure shown in Fig. 2(a) and have found most utility for single-molecule applications involving proteins. Their lipophilic properties meant that they were initially employed as membrane stains, but sulfonated indocarbocyanine derivatives including Cy3, Cy5, and Cy7 [Figs. 2(d)–2(f)] are now widely used for biomolecular labeling. The cyanines are named according to the number of carbon atoms between the indoline moieties with the longer polymethine chains corresponding to longer emission wavelengths. In this context, Cy3, Cy5, and Cy7 exhibit peak emission at 568, 652, and 755 nm, respectively. While their quantum yields are typically lower than many other organic dyes ($\phi_{Cy3} \sim 0.31$; $\phi_{Cy5} \sim 0.27$; $\phi_{Cy7} \sim 0.2$), their high extinction coefficients ($\varepsilon_{Cy3} \sim 150\,000$ $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$; $\varepsilon_{Cy5} \sim 250\,000$ $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$; $\varepsilon_{Cy7} \sim 199\,000$) $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$ position them among the brightest.[49]

Longer-chain dialkylcarbocyanines, such as DiO, DiI, and DiD, are often employed as membrane stains for live-cell,[50] fixed tissue[51] and model-membrane[52] imaging. Due to their excellent lipophilic properties, incubation of biological membranes with solutions containing the probes for only a few minutes is sufficient to achieve uniform labeling via lateral diffusion [Fig. 3(a)]. In this way, high probe density is often obtained, with minimal reported effects on cell viability or physiology.[50,53] An important point is that they do not tend to transfer from labeled to unlabeled membranes, except in the case of targeted fusion.[54] The spectral characteristics of the dialkylcarbocyanines are determined by the heteroatoms in the terminal ring systems and length of the connecting bridge, as opposed to the chain length. DiO, for instance, absorbs strongly at 484 nm with peak emission at 501 nm, while DiI and DiD absorb and emit at 549/644 and 565/665 nm, respectively [Fig. 3(b)]. Much like the short-chain derivatives, the longer chains also have high extinction coefficients ($\varepsilon_{DiO} \sim 140\,000$ $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$; $\varepsilon_{DiI} \sim 148\,000$ $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$; $\varepsilon_{DiD} \sim 193\,000$) and comparable excited state lifetimes (~1 ns), though their quantum yields tend to be somewhat lower (~0.07).[55,56] Such probes offer a chance to probe the local dynamics and curvature of lipid bilayers via measurement of their rotational time trajectories.[40,57] Both DiI and DiD, for example, have two hydrocarbon tails that mimic phospholipid tails, and their transition dipole moments lie along the plane of the membrane; thus, they are excellent candidates for probing rotational motion.

Unlike the dialkylcarbocyanines, lipophilic aminostyryl probes, such as DiA and 4-Di-10-ASP, undergo substantial spectral shifts when incorporated within a membrane environment, and as such have also been employed for membrane staining, despite comparatively broad absorption and emission spectra [Fig. 3(c)].[58] Derivatives including FAST DiI, in which the saturated tails have been replaced with diunsaturated alkyl groups, offer accelerated membrane diffusion and staining, while sulfonated, thiol-reactive variants, including CM-DiI, are suitable for staining after permabilization.[59] Through FRET-based experiments, in which energy is transferred from membrane-embedded donors to acceptors [Fig. 3(a)], the incorporation of such dyes into model vesicles at relatively low molar percentages (~0.1%) has been used to monitor vesicle fusion through lipid mixing assays[56,60] and to reveal solubilization mechanisms and kinetics.[21,61,62]

While the cyanines represent one of the most versatile and adaptable of all small molecule probe designs, they are subject to photo-induced oxidation even in the presence of low levels of oxygen. As such, without the presence of oxygen scavengers in the local fluorophore environment, the dyes are subject to fast photobleaching rates, which often limits their use for long-term imaging.[63]

The xanthenes represent another widely used group of probes, with the most popular being fluorescein- and rhodamine-based [Fig. 2(b)]. Synthesis is typically achieved via a simple condensation

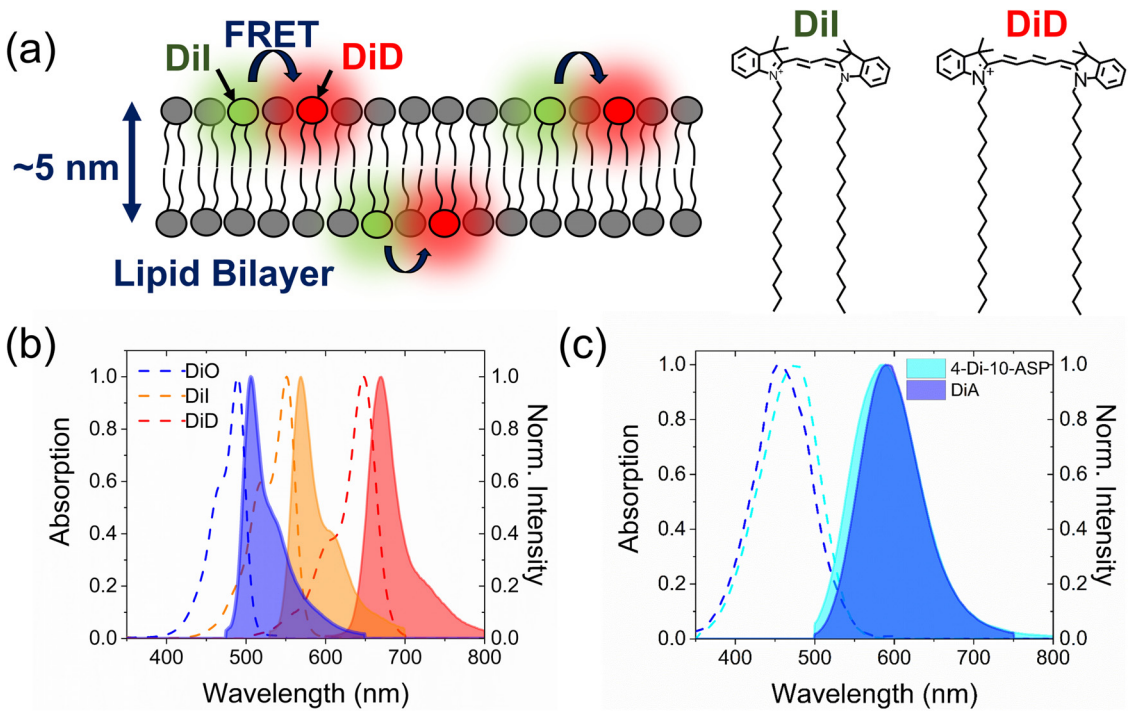


**FIG. 3.** Spectral characteristics of lipophilic membrane stains. (a) Schematic illustration of a lipid bilayer stained with the FRET pair DiI and DiD (left panel). The structures of DiI (∼2.1 nm long) and DiD (∼2.0 nm long) (right panel) contain aliphatic tails which partition into the lipid bilayer, leaving the fluorophore on the external leaflet. FRET can occur between lipophilic donors and acceptors within a lipid mixture if their spatial separation is typically <8 nm. Absorption and normalized fluorescence emission spectra of membrane-bound (b) DiO (blue), DiI (orange), DiD (red) and (c) DiA (blue) and 4-Di-10-ASP (cyan).

reaction, though traditional approaches in this regard were compatible only with the simplest functional groups. As a consequence, Pd-catalyzed cross coupling strategies beginning from simple fluorescein emerged, giving rise to a series of organic dyes commonly referred to as the Janelia Fluor (JF) dyes.[64] The JF probes contain four-membered azetidine rings and have larger quantum yields and enhanced photostability relative to those reported for classic rhodamines and cyanines.[65] JF 549 ($\varepsilon_{JF\ 549} = 101\,000\ M^{-1}\ cm^{-1}$, $\phi_{JF\ 549} = 0.88$) [Fig. 2(j)] which emits at 571 nm, has, for example, found particular utility in live-cell applications.[66,67] Replacing the xanthene oxygen in JF 549 with a quaternary carbon gives rise to JF 648 ($\varepsilon_{JF\ 648} = 152\,000\ M^{-1}\ cm^{-1}$, $\phi_{JF\ 648} = 0.54$) with emission centered on a wavelength of 631 nm.[68] Longer emission wavelengths of 664 nm (for example JF 646; $\varepsilon_{JF\ 646} = 152\,000\ M^{-1}\ cm^{-1}$, $\phi_{JF\ 646} = 0.54$) are also available through Si-Rhodamine synthesis, while shifts to shorter wavelengths have been achieved by replacing the azetidine group with an oxygen atom.[69,70] Much like the cyanines, the xanthenes also suffer from limited photostability, though factors such as solubility, membrane permeability, cell compartmentalization and aggregation are dependent on the specific chemical structure of the probe and must be accounted for on a case-by-case basis.[49] Nevertheless, their adaptability and comparable brightness to the cyanines also mean that they are commonplace among single-molecule research labs.

The boron-dipyrromethenes (BODIPYs) represent a relatively new class of probe. Much like the cyanines and xanthenes, they too exhibit narrowband absorption and emission spectra, but in contrast they have significantly higher quantum yields, often approaching unity. For example, the quantum yields of BODIPY 581/591, BDP TR, BDP TMR, and BDP FL are 0.83, 0.90, 0.95, and 0.97, respectively. However, strong intramolecular hydrogen bonding between hydroxyl and formyl groups within the BDP structure introduce backbone rigidity, and this leads to relatively small Stokes shifts of only a few nanometers.[71] BODIPY FL [Fig. 2(g)] is a common substitute for fluorescein but with peak absorption and emission at wavelengths of 503 and 509 nm, respectively, only a 6 nm window exists for resolving the excitation and emission. On the other hand, BODIPY TMR [Fig. 2(h)], a derivative synthesized to match tetramethylrhodamine fluorescence, has peak absorption and emission at wavelength of 545 and 570 nm, offering improved flexibility. Despite favorable photophysical properties associated with the free dye in solution, BDP derivatives have reportedly suffered from reduced brightness upon conjugation to proteins, which ultimately places a constraint on single-molecule sensitivity.[72] The relatively high hydrophobicity associated with BODIPYs also means care must be taken to ensure minimal nonspecific adhesion.[73] Despite these concerns, BODIPYs have found utility in single-molecule applications involving protein folding[74,75] and recently, photoswitchable versions have found utility in efficient FRET-based measurements.[76–78]

Most organic dyes are available with functional groups for bioconjugation, and many have been modified to include side chains and/or double bonds at specific locations in order to reduce flexibility, minimize *cis-trans* isomerization, and enhance the quantum yield. Cy3, for

example, is capable of undergoing isomerization around the polymethine group and this can lead to spectral shifting and photoblinking. By incorporating three six-membered rings into its backbone, the derivative (Cy3B) is conformationally locked and exhibits a fourfold relative enhancement in quantum yield.[44] Similarly, organic dyes with additional sulfo-groups help improve solubility, while charged sulfonate groups help decrease dye aggregation.[46] For these reasons, organic dyes are also interchangeable. Cy5, for instance, is spectrally similar to Alexa Fluor 647 [Fig. 2(k)] but displays poor relative photostability. The incorporation of sulfonic acid groups into the Alexa Fluor 647 structure provides higher levels of solubility by comparison.[79]

While the spectral characteristics of many organic dyes are similar, they also have many other unique attributes, and their performance must be carefully scrutinized for each purpose. For example, ATTO647N represents one of the most emissive and photostable red-emitters and has been used to achieve high spatial accuracy in super-resolution and localization experiments.[80–82] However, it is comparatively hydrophobic when compared with many other organic dyes and can, depending on the environment, exhibit substantial spectral shifts.[24]

Most organic dyes have found utility in protein and nucleic acid labeling, however to date there have been only a handful of reports on the single-molecule detection of carbohydrates. While the imaging of single Alexa Fluor 488 [Fig. 2(i)] labeled heparin sulfate disaccharides encapsulated within lipid vesicles has been reported,[83] as has the detection of Alexa Fluor 647 tagged monosaccharides[84,85] and Cy7-labeled maltose,[86] this is clearly an area which demands further development, not least because carbohydrates underpin a wide-class of vital cellular functions.

A wide range of organic dyes also exist for the non-covalent labeling of DNA molecules. These can be broadly classified into three major classes: groove binders, intercalators, and cationic electrostatic/allosteric binders that bind to the negatively charged phosphate backbone via attractive ionic interactions [Fig. 4(a)].[87] In the latter case, positive charges on the probe arise from the existence of an exocyclic ammonium or endocyclic pyridinium moiety. The intercalators, which can be cationic or neutral, bind to the DNA by inserting aromatic groups between adjacent base pairs, with representative examples including ellipticine, proflavine, acridine orange, methylene blue, ethidium bromide, thiazole orange, the SYTOX derivatives, and YOYO-1. In the case of ellipticine, molecular dynamics simulations indicate

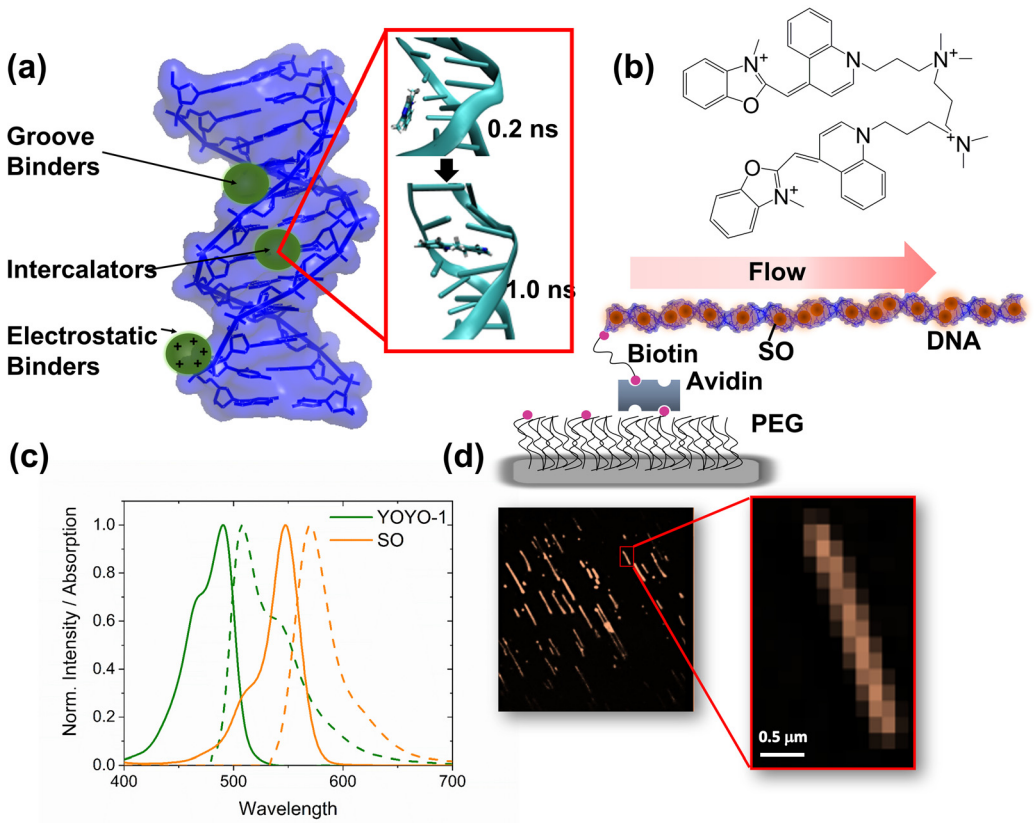


**FIG. 4.** Commonly used intercalators for visualization of single nucleic acids. (a) Schematic illustration of different DNA binders. The DNA backbone (PDB ID: 1BNA) and base pairs are shown in blue. Inset: ellipticine (represented by a ball and stick model) intercalates into the DNA bases (represented as rods) over ∼0.8 ns as suggested via targeted molecular dynamics simulations. (b) Chemical structure of YOYO-1. (c) Absorption (solid lines) and fluorescence emission spectra (dashed lines) of YOYO-1 (green) and SYTOX orange (orange). (d) Representative TIRFM images (lower panels) of single $\lambda$-DNA molecules immobilized onto a glass coverslip coated in polyethylene glycol (PEG) via biotin-streptavidin interactions in the presence of 1 nM SYTOX Orange under 20 $\mu$L/min flow conditions (top panel).

rapid intercalation timescales [Fig. 4(a)], and in nearly all cases, variations in the absorption and emission properties upon binding have enabled a multitude of imaging-based experiments.

Visualization of single double-stranded DNA molecules undergoing conformational changes was initially achieved via fluorescence from 4′,6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (DAPI) upon interaction with adenine–thymine-rich regions.[88] In such examples, we note that single intercalators and not visualized per se, but rather the nucleic acids are observed via multiple fluorescing labels. However, relatively low binding affinities and poor photophysical properties motivated the development of a new class of dyes that undergo quantum yield enhancements upon DNA binding. The most widely used of these probes for single-molecule research are YOYO-1 and SYTOX orange (SO).

YOYO-1 [Fig. 4(b)] is a cyanine derivative with peak absorption and emission at 491 and 509 nm, respectively [Fig. 4(c)], and binds to double stranded DNA with high affinity ($k_D \sim 5$–$50$ nM).[89] Fluorescence enhancements of ∼1000-fold occur upon binding, leading to the high signal-to-noise ratios necessary for nucleic acid detection. YOYO-1 has, for example, helped researchers to identify conformational changes in single DNA molecules during replication,[90] and has facilitated quantification of base-pair orientations via polarization microscopy.[39]

SO, also a cyanine derivative with peak absorption at 547 nm and emission at 570 nm [Fig. 4(c)], intercalates into double-stranded DNA as a monomer[91] and undergoes substantially greater emission intensity enhancements upon binding (>1000-fold). While the chemical structure of SO is proprietary, the reported dissociation constant of ∼10 nM is of similar magnitude to that observed by YOYO-1. The kinetic binding rates are, however, an order of magnitude faster, enabling labeling to be achieved almost immediately.[92] As shown in Fig. 4(d), the most versatile application involving intercalators has been the DNA curtains technique,[93] where single surface-tethered DNA molecules are stretched under flow containing nM concentrations of intercalator, and visualized by techniques such as total internal reflection fluorescence microscopy (TIRFM). The method allows for the parallel imaging of hundreds of aligned molecules and presents a robust experimental platform from which to investigate a multitude of protein- and enzyme-DNA interactions with millisecond timescale resolution.

The time constant of DNA intercalation depends on the number of intercalating moieties and the overall timescale required to reach equilibrium. The process can involve the insertion of a single moiety per probe, as is the case for ellipticine [Fig. 4(a)], two moieties per probe, such as for YOYO-1 [Fig. 4(b)] or multi-intercalating sub-units. The timescale for reaching the final equilibrium state ranges over six orders of magnitude; though, we note this is likely contingent upon the DNA template used, its structural conformation, the free energy landscape, and the accessibility of intercalation sites.[94] The association rates and mechanisms of intercalation vary from probe-to-probe but in general, the association rates of traditional mono- and bi-intercalators, are several orders of magnitude faster than the association rates of unconventional groove binders. The mono-intercalator ethidium bromide displays association kinetics of only a few milliseconds in the ensemble, and bis-intercalators, including YOYO-1, intercalate with a typical time constant of a few seconds. On the other hand, unconventional binders, including actinomycin D, generally display slow association kinetics on the order of several thousand seconds, though destabilization of double stranded DNA by force has been shown to exponentially facilitate the on rates.[95] Importantly, fast association rates are characteristic for common mono- and bis-cyanine-based intercalators and therefore one can suppose that structurally similar derivatives will display similar traits. The fast association rates achievable using mono- and bis-intercalators relative to the nominal timescale of typical DNA curtains experiments (∼10–100 s), thus, provide the basis for examining single nucleic acids *in vitro*. YOYO-1 has also been employed for high precision microscopy of single DNA molecules by utilizing its stochastic, reversible photolinking to generate super-resolved localized data of labeled DNA.[96]

Despite indications that YOYO-1 and SO may subtly alter the mechanical and structural properties of DNA upon binding,[97,98] other work has established that the persistence length and rigidity remain unaffected.[99] In addition, the binding affinities are governed by a strongly tension-dependent but tunable dissociation rate, and optimization of this parameter can reduce the effect of the intercalators on strand separation and enzymatic function.[100]

To complement the use of organic dyes for direct and indirect biomolecular labeling, several probes have been developed to sense the biomolecular environment. These include sensors which quantify the presence of metal ions and report the solution pH. Currently, there is no single dye that permits measurement of all environmental parameters directly within a single sample, but combinations of fluorescent organic dyes hold promise in this regard. Generally, these sensors are designed to measure free hydrated ions, while not engaging in competitive exchange.[101] The majority of the probes undergo quenching between the metal binding domain and the fluorophore via photoinduced electron transfer (PET) in the absence of the ions, and undergo a fluorescence enhancement during binding due to PET-disruption. Derivatives of fluorescein, including the Zinpyr (ZP) family of dyes, have been employed as sensors of $Zn^{2+}$ in live cells. ZP1, which contains a di-2-picolylamine $Zn^{2+}$ chelator and a dichlorofluorescein emitter,[102] is an established sensor of metalloneurochemistry,[103] but next-generation probes, such as ZP2, ZP3, and ZP4, have since offered a sixfold increase in dynamic range, lower pKa values, simpler synthesis procedures, and enhanced signal-to-noise ratios. ZP1 derivatives, including ZnAF-1F and ZNAF-2F, in which the fluorine at the ortho-position of the phenolic hydroxyl group has been substituted, now offer a 69- and 60-fold fluorescence enhancement, respectively, when fully bound to $Zn^{2+}$. However, the quantum yields of both probes in the absence of $Zn^{2+}$ are relatively low (∼0.006), rendering their single-molecule detection challenging.[104]

A number of $Zn^{2+}$ probes have also been designed based on the structures of existing $Ca^{2+}$ sensors, and of these, FluoZin-3 is one of the most widely used.[105] Here, an acetate group on the $Ca^{2+}$ chelator has reduced affinity for $Ca^{2+}$, while offering a 200-fold fluorescence enhancement in the presence of $Zn^{2+}$ ($k_D \sim 15$ nM). A growing number of similar small molecule sensors have been developed to measure vesicular $Zn^{2+}$ pools, including Zinquin,[106] ZincBy-1,[107] SpiroZin1,[108] and SpiroZin2,[109] though differences in emission stability and nonspecific localization vary from probe-to-probe and must be taken into consideration.[110]

In a similar way, the development of $Ca^{2+}$ indicators[111] has led to important insights into signaling pathways.[112] $Ca^{2+}$ sensors typically undergo either a fluorescent enhancement or decrease to reflect

changes in the local $Ca^{2+}$ concentration, though it is worth noting that indicator concentration, cytosolic location and pH may also contribute. These indicators are generally divided into single-color or ratiometric probes based on their response to $Ca^{2+}$.[113,114] Single-color probes, such as Fluo-4, display >100-fold increase in fluorescence intensity at 506 nm, whereas ratiometric indicators exhibit shifts in excitation and/or emission wavelengths upon binding. Consequently, single-color probes are generally used for qualitative estimates of $Ca^{2+}$ levels. Recently, the Cal-520 probe, which undergoes a twofold increase in brightness when fully bound to $Ca^{2+}$, has been used as probe protein- and surfactant-induced permeabilization in lipid vesicles and offers a promising alternative.[21,115,116] Conversely, when $Ca^{2+}$ binds to ratiometric indicators, such as Indo-1 and Fura-2, emission enhancements at shorter wavelengths concurrent with emission reductions at longer wavelengths typically occur, facilitating quantitative estimates of $Ca^{2+}$ molarity. In the case of Fura-2, the requirement to perform alternating excitation at 340/380 nm can hinder data acquisition, though it has a higher dynamic range when compared with Indo-1.

It comes as no surprise that the design, synthesis, and characterization of a wide variety of organic dyes using an assortment of fluorogenic units have preceded a range of single-molecule applications. Yet, while the rhodamine and fluorescein derivatives generally exhibit high quantum yields and good photostability, their biological applications have been limited because their absorption and emission range extend only up to 600 nm. For single-molecule detection in living cells, autofluorescence is substantially reduced at wavelengths >600 nm, and thus red- and near-infrared wavelengths offer an overall improvement to the signal-to-noise ratio. Similarly, although cyanine derivatives have been extensively used, they are only moderately photostable. In this regard, rylene dyes formed via the linkage of naphthalene units in peri-positions, are known to have high quantum yields, some even as high as 0.8–0.9, are generally much more photostable than commercially available cyanines (typically by a factor of ∼100), with uncharged species showing particular promise in this area, and are available with emission >600 nm.[117] Historically, a major limitation of rylene dyes for biological applications was their relatively poor solubility, but recently, the introduction of ionic sulfonyl, pyridoxy, polyethylene glycol, and peri-guanidine side groups have helped alleviate this issue and have facilitated a wide-range of single-molecule and live-cell experiments.[117–119] Most can also be modified with functional groups for biomolecular labeling. Of particular note, the development of perylene diimides has shown particular promise for imaging membranes, biosensing *in vitro*, detecting antibodies, monitoring cellular uptake, and detecting gene/drug delivery in living cells.[120] While solubility has vastly improved, minimizing undesirable self-aggregation properties of rylene dyes is still an area of concern, though clearly exciting prospects lie ahead for this class of organic probe.

In addition to the rylene dyes, water-soluble dyes containing diketopyrrolopyrroles (DPPs) have also offered attractive properties to the single-molecule community because of their excellent photostability and high quantum yields (0.4–0.9). The general DPP structure is synthesized by the reaction of aromatic nitrile with dialkyl succinate to produce a planar structure with strong intramolecular hydrogen bonding and $\pi$–$\pi$ stacking between adjacent molecules, both of which are key to its chemical stability. Of particular note is the presence of a bicyclic lactam chromophoric unit containing three different functional groups (–C = C– double bonds, carbonyl and amine (NH) groups) that may be used as building blocks for further synthetic modification and derivatization, and as a platform for a vast array of functionalization possibilities. The biological applications, especially in living cells, have however been limited because most DPP derivatives absorb in the range 435–510 nm and emit <600 nm. That said, with moderately high extinction coefficients (∼25 000 $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$) of solution and membrane-bound forms, considerable effort has been dedicated to their single-molecule application. For example, recent work involving structurally rigid L-shaped isoindoledione, produced via DPP synthesis, has enabled solvent-sensitive emission up to ∼630 nm with large Stokes shifts to be achieved while minimizing autofluorescence.[121] In the same work, an N-alkylated isoindoledione containing a benzofuryl substituent was found to stain cell membranes exclusively, though a substantial reduction in quantum yield by comparison was noted. The use of DPP-based probes has also emerged as promising with respect to molecular imaging, and several studies have explored the two-photon absorption properties of DPP-conjugated dyes, demonstrating their potential utility for deep imaging. In this regard we refer the reader to an extensive review in this area.[122] The application of ratiometric DPP-containing probes has also demonstrated specificity toward esterase in cells, even in the presence of other analytes.[123]

Over the years, organic dyes have found vast utility in the context of *in vitro* single-molecule detection, imaging, and quantification. However, for many applications, especially those involving live-cell imaging, they have taken somewhat of a backseat, owing in part to the development of genetically encoded fluorescent proteins.

## B. Fluorescent proteins

The purification of the green fluorescent protein (GFP) from *Aequorea victoria* jellyfish[124] revolutionized the single-molecule field and led to methods of expressing translationally fused fluorescent proteins as labels of proteins of interest via genetic engineering, bypassing the need for any form of chemical attachment [Figs. 5(a) and 5(b)].[125–127] Unlike quantum dots (QDs) and organic dyes, which require appropriately designed conjugation schemes, fluorescent proteins offer a valuable alternative for *in cellulo* and *in vivo* imaging. A second appealing characteristic rests in their ability to confer high cellular and sub-cellular specificity using promoters, enabling these probes to report from specific, often otherwise inaccessible regions. Additionally, fluorescent proteins are easily inserted into live cells by transfection or virus infection and can be upheld for timescales far surpassing 24 h prior to excretion.[128] Fluorescent proteins have, thus, been applied extensively—for example, in live cell FRET biosensing experiments,[129] as both donors and acceptors, in fluorescence lifetime imaging (FLIM) for the detection of protein–protein interactions,[130] interrogating the dynamic interplay between proteins and lipids[131] and to count the number of subunits in functional molecular machines.[96]

Among the most widely used FRET sensors is the blue–yellow mTurquoise2 (donor) and sEYFP (acceptor) pair, which provides a Förster radius of 5.9 and ∼2–8 nm sensitivity.[130] Derivatives of sEYFP also exist (including mVenus, mCitrine, and YPet), and each has been tailored to accommodate minor pH switching.[132–134] A major limitation of long-term FRET imaging, however, is their relatively poor photostability. The emission signal often dissipates rapidly over time, thereby affecting the ratio of donor to acceptor emission intensities

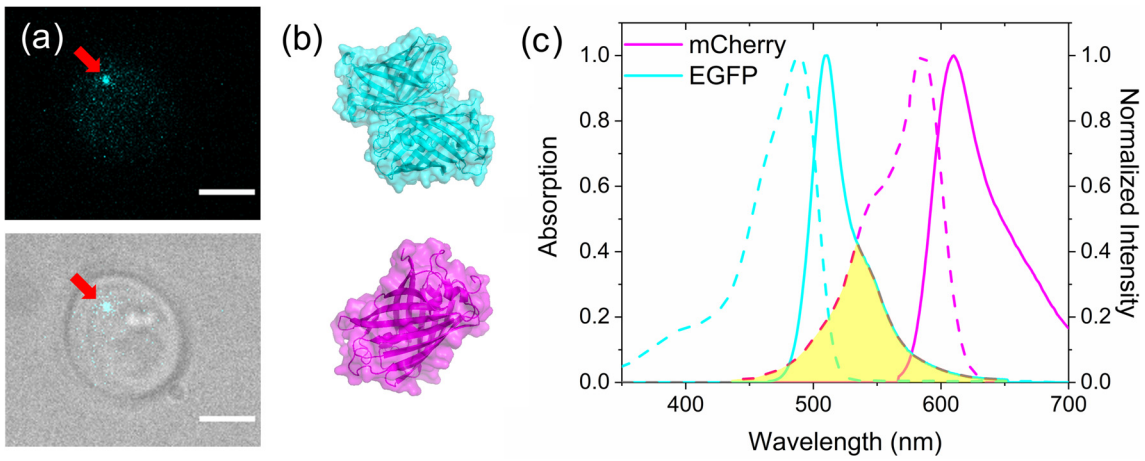


**FIG. 5.** Single-molecule imaging of fluorescent proteins. (a) Saccharomyces cerevisiae under glucose depletion. Here, the Mig1 repressor is fluorescently labeled with GFP (cyan). Representative fluorescence image obtained via slimfield microscopy[141] of a single Mig1-GFP molecule (top panel) enables its spatial position within the cell to be evaluated when overlaid and compared against the corresponding brightfield image. (b) Crystal structures of GFP (top panel, PDB ID: 1GFL) and mCherry (bottom panel, PDB ID: 2H5Q) showing locations of the alpha helices, beta strands and coiled-coiled regions. (c) Absorption (dashed) and fluorescence emission (solid) spectra of EGFP and mCherry demonstrating the spectral overlap (yellow shaded region) necessary for compatibility with single-molecule FRET imaging.

and necessitating corrections for photobleaching. It follows that fluorescent proteins for FRET-based applications should be chosen based on high brightness, long-term photostability and insensitivity to pH fluctuations. Unfortunately, engineering fluorescent proteins with all desired properties remains a major experimental challenge, though progress has been made with the development of mClover3 and mRuby3. In such examples, oxygen access to the chromophores is limited.[133,135] Pairs such as mClover3-mRuby3 or similarly, mNeongreen-mRuby3, therefore, hold promise for live-cell FRET imaging in the future. On the other hand, EYFP and mCitrine are strongly pH-sensitive and have potential for detecting activities, such as protein function, metabolic reactions, and autophagy, where pH regulation is critical.[136]

Green–red FRET pairs, such as the EGFP-mCherry [Figs. 5(b) and 5(c)] and GFP-mRuby2 combination, overcome some of the limitations of blue–yellow pairs. For instance, excitation in the green generally reduces autofluorescence, the proteins are less phototoxic, they exhibit greater spectral separation, and they have extended distance sensitivity.[137–139] Furthermore, unlike other fluorescent proteins, mCherry emission is only rarely interrupted by photoblinking. FRET pairs with spectra in the far-red, such as the mPlum-IFP1.4 duo,[140] have the additional advantages of further reducing autofluorescence and offer the potential for deep-tissue imaging, though further developments in this area are required to improve overall brightness.

Although blue, green, yellow, and red fluorescent proteins have been extensively used, their complicated photophysics, coupled with photostability issues, mean that their application in single-molecule experiments is still challenging. To help bridge this gap, photoactivatable and photoswitchable fluorescent proteins have been engineered to aid with diffusion studies and to understanding pathways. While the former are induced to switch from a low-emissive dark state to an emissive bright state, the latter are stimulated to emit at shifted wavelengths.[142] Among these derivatives, the photoactivatable variant of GFP, avGFP, exhibits an excitation spectrum with two distinct peaks (396 and 476 nm) corresponding to protonated and deprotonated chromophores. Upon UV excitation, the ratio of these peaks changes in favor of the deprotonated form.[143] The photoactivatable and switchable properties of such fluorescent proteins allow the labeled biomolecule to be tracked without the need for continuous visualization, which goes some way to overcoming the issue of low photostability.

It comes as no surprise that many challenges remain in this area, not least of which is the need to engineer fluorescent proteins with higher quantum yields. One potential strategy to achieve this is to develop a suite of fluorescent proteins with improved maturation and folding attributes. Furthermore, one should be aware that self-assembling fluorescent proteins, caused by hydrophobic mutations can interfere with FRET-based distance conversions, though modifications of peptide linkers between fluorescent proteins and the sensing region could be a potential strategy to overcome this.[144] The relatively large size of fluorescent proteins means that they can also interfere with, for example, kinase motion, though some fluorescent proteins bypass this by reporting on nucleo-cytoplasmic shuttling readouts.[145]

### C. Quantum dots

Quantum dots (QDs) are nanoparticles composed of periodic groups of III-V, II-VI, or IV-VI semiconductor materials, such as CdS, CdSe, CdTe, ZnS, ZnSe, and InP with tunable physical dimensions as well as optoelectronic properties, which are not available from isolated molecules or bulk solids. They exhibit discrete energy levels, and their bandgap can be precisely modulated by varying their size. Their high emission intensities, large Stokes shift, narrow emission and broad absorption spectra, large molar extinction coefficients, high quantum yields, strong resistance to photobleaching, and long fluorescence lifetimes[146–149] have made them particularly attractive across the single-molecule community as *in vitro* and *in vivo* biosensors,[150] and their production has also led to substantial contributions toward the development of super-resolution imaging and single-particle tracking[151] techniques. Furthermore, their electronic features are enabling the

development of QD-based electrochemical[152] and electroluminescent biosensing either as a catalyst or light-emitter, and recent developments have even seen them used as single particle drug delivery vehicles.[153]

QDs are typically prepared using organometallic chemistry methods[154] to yield emission wavelengths spanning across the UV, visible, and infrared. For biological applications, it is critical to render the QD soluble through surface-passivation, with the ideal water-soluble ligand (i) enhancing QD stability, (ii) maintaining resistance of the QD to photobleaching and degradation, (iii) containing functional groups for bio-conjugation, and (iv) minimizing the particle size. While the physical and optical properties of QDs have been extensively studied for single-molecule applications, such as multiplexed imaging,[155] *in vivo* bio-detection,[156] and FRET,[157] CdTe and CdSe derivatives have attracted particular attention owing to their versatility.

CdTe is a II-VI semiconductor with a bandgap energy of ∼1.5 eV at 300 K,[158] corresponding to infrared emission, but as its size is reduced to the order of several nanometers via the quantum confinement of charge carriers, the fluorescence emission wavelength peak shifts through the visible range (500–750 nm). As the density of states near the conduction and valence bands reduces below 12 nm, discrete excitonic states form. Consequently, the bandgap increases, resulting in a peak shift of the spectrum[159] (Fig. 6). In a similar way, the bandgap of CdSe QDs increases from 1.9 to 2.8 eV as the size decreases from 7 to 2 nm, enabling tailored emission in the range 450–650 nm.[159] We note that on comparison to core-type CdTe QDs, core shell CdSe/ZnS particles exhibit narrower emission features (Fig. 6), though the precise range over which emission occurs and the

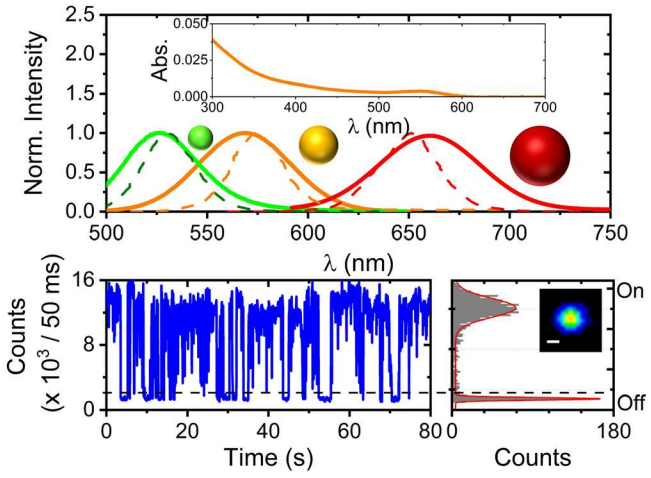


**FIG. 6.** Fluorescence emission of single quantum dots. Top panel: Size-dependent emission spectra associated with CdTe and CdSe/ZnS quantum dots. Shown are representative emission spectra for core-type CdTe-530 (solid green) (inset: absorption spectra), −580 (solid orange) and −680 (solid red) and CdSe/ZnS-530 (dashed green), −580 (dashed orange) and −650 (dashed red). Lower panel: Representative single particle fluorescence trajectory (left panel) and corresponding intensity histogram (right panel) indicating photoblinking from highly emissive on states to non-emissive "off" states obtained from TIRFM imaging of a single CdTe 580 QD (inset, scale bar = 500 nm). The dashed line corresponds to a threshold intensity level of six standard deviations above background used for differentiating between on and off states.

spectral properties ultimately depend on the materials used, surface coatings and particle size. Though CdTe and CdSe are among the most widely used of all QDs, the implications of the Cd/Te and Cd/Se molar ratios on optical properties such as emission intensity, quantum yield and lifetime is a relatively new area that demands further exploration.[160,161] Nevertheless, their high quantum yields (20%–80%) place them among the brightest of all available probes.[162] Their extinction coefficients associated with the first excitonic absorption peak, though strongly size-dependent, are relatively large ($\varepsilon = 1\text{–}8 \times 10^5$ $M^{-1}$ $cm^{-1}$)[163] and their two-photon absorption cross sections are orders of magnitude larger than those associated with organic dyes.[159] We note that the extinction coefficients at the first exciton peak are much lower than those at shorter wavelengths, in contrast to organic dyes which have their largest extinction coefficient at the peak of their absorption spectrum. Coupled with their broad excitation spectra which increase toward the UV, relatively long lifetimes (>10 ns) and resistance to chemical degradation, CdTe and CdSe QDs are excellent candidates for tracking time-dependent dynamic processes,[151] biomedical imaging including *in vivo* tumor detection,[164,165] deep tissue imaging,[166] environmental sensing,[167,168] and antibody detection.[169]

Core-type QDs, such as CdTe and CdSe, do however suffer from lower quantum yields and photostability,[170] though this can be improved by passivation of the surface with semiconductors, such as CdS or ZnS. Some common examples of these so-called core-shell QDs include CdS on CdSe and ZnS on CdSe, the latter containing a larger fraction of brighter particles relative to the core-type case as a result of increased single-particle quantum yields.[171] The application of such QDs in single-molecule imaging has been mainly directed toward mammalian cells, though there is an increasing tendency to apply them for intracellular tracking, diagnostics, *in vivo* imaging and therapeutic delivery[172] and, for electrochemiluminescene assays where femtomolar detection of single particles is now possible.[173,174] For example, the single-particle tracking of QD-conjugated membrane receptors[175] and proteins[176,177] in living cells has enabled their diffusion characteristics in response to environmental stimuli to be accessed for long timescales (>20 min) and temporal resolutions (<1 ms[178]) surpassing those conventionally accessible using organic dyes. Further QD tracking applications have included their use as tumor-targeting drug delivery vehicles[179] and as encapsulated cargo within synaptic vesicles.[180] QDs have also found utility as effective single-particle FRET acceptors, though their long fluorescence lifetimes dictate the need for donors with comparably long lifetimes, such as lanthanide dyes, as opposed to organic dyes, for detectable FRET.[181] It follows that QD-based single-particle detection offers multifunctional and attractive opportunities for probing and manipulating biological systems, both *in vitro* and *in vivo*, but great care must be taken during their synthesis and integration with biological molecules to avoid perturbing function.

To harness the attractive optical properties of QDs, it would be ideal to minimize their size for biomolecular-labeling. Being comparably large, with often insoluble properties and being incapable of precise valency controlled labeling, they rely heavily on being passivated with organic ligands. While the ligands should improve QD solubility, they must also provide the QD surface with a chemical platform from which to enable effective and efficient biomolecular conjugation.[182–184] CdTe QDs, for instance, are typically capped with mercaptopropionic

acid or mercaptosuccinic acid terminated with –COOH for these reasons.[185] Recently, QDs wrapped in functionalized oligonucleotides have shown promise in the context of single particle tracking,[186,187] ligands covalently coupled to polyethylene glycols have helped to minimize nonspecific binding,[188,189] and water-dispersible QDs comprising hydrophobic QDs and zwitterionic moieties have realized liposomal-like structures that preserve optical and colloidal stability.[190] Amphiphilic polymers have also been used to improve bioconjugation,[191] and although challenges still exist, strategies for producing monovalent QDs have been reported.[191,192] We direct the reader to comprehensive reviews in these areas.[172,189,191,193] Despite such advances, the QD size, solubility and valency of labeling are still significant hurdles that must be overcome when QDs are employed as single-particle sensors.

An interesting property of quantum dots is their fluorescent intermittency, whereby the fluorescence intensity from a single QD fluctuates between highly emissive "on" states and non-emissive "dark" states (Fig. 6). While the root cause of photoblinking is still debated, evidence points toward a mechanism in which electron transfer to trap states in the QD or surrounding matrix leads to photoinduced charging.[194,195] QD photoblinking provides a simple way of achieving super-resolution localization via conventional fluorescence microscopy[196] and blinking rates may be modulated in the presence of ions, offering environmental sensitivity.[167,197,198] Taken together, understanding, suppressing, and manipulating the blinking characteristics of QDs are important lines of single-particle research.

Importantly, not all QDs are identical, and they cannot be considered as a uniform group. QD toxicity, for example, is closely linked to the intrinsic properties of the quantum dot, including material, shell type, ligand, surface chemistry, and size.[199] A number of assays have been employed over the years to evaluate the influence of QDs on cellular organelles, protein expression, and clearance mechanisms, and in some cases, QD modifications have been made to mitigate against the effects, but it is important to note that while some examples of QD have demonstrable influence on biological function, others, have minimal impact.[199–202] While it is outside the scope of this review to provide an exhaustive list of QD flavors and their reported toxicities, care must be taken to minimize or reduce toxicity, either through careful choice of QD or via QD modification, and this is especially true in the context of live-cell applications.[197]

### D. Fluorescent nanodiamonds

Fluorescent nanodiamonds (FNDs) are now emerging as promising biomarkers for single-molecule applications. While FNDs can be easily detected by conventional fluorescence microscopy, unlike QDs and organic dyes, their existence inside the cell does not typically induce cell death.[203] FNDs have been reported to be over an order of magnitude brighter and more photostable than conventional organic dyes,[204] and many display spectral shifts in response to changes in magnetic fields, electric fields and temperature gradients, making them useful nanosensors for high-resolution imaging.[205] The tunable emission properties arise from the doping of nanodiamonds with defects such as nitrogen, europium, and silicon vacancies [Fig. 7(a)]. These behave like isolated atoms or molecules in a host matrix, with emission stemming from these locations as opposed to the bulk material[206–211] [Fig. 7(b)]. Fluorescence arising from nitrogen-vacancy doped FNDs is photostable, even after months of continuous excitation.[212] While they are also known for their biological inertness, successful FND-labeling of proteins[213,214] and DNA[215] has been achieved since their surface can be terminated with oxygen or hydrogen.

Of all FNDs, those which are nitrogen-vacancy doped have shown most promise for single-molecule applications, though it is worth noting that only a fraction of elements in the periodic table have been incorporated as defects. Not only are they now routinely used for long-term particle tracking and localization in live cells,[216–218] owing to their excellent photostability, they have also been used to sense magnetic fields through spectral shifts in their fluorescence emission, revealing FND orientation in the process.[218] Their application has also extended to FRET-based sensing, where nitrogen-vacancy doped FNDs have acted as donors for black hole quenching dyes such as DY781,[219] or as GFP acceptors for observing rotational motion in the $F_0F_1$ ATP synthase.[216]

For future single-molecule applications where small-sized FNDs are required, it may be possible to prepare them with specific numbers

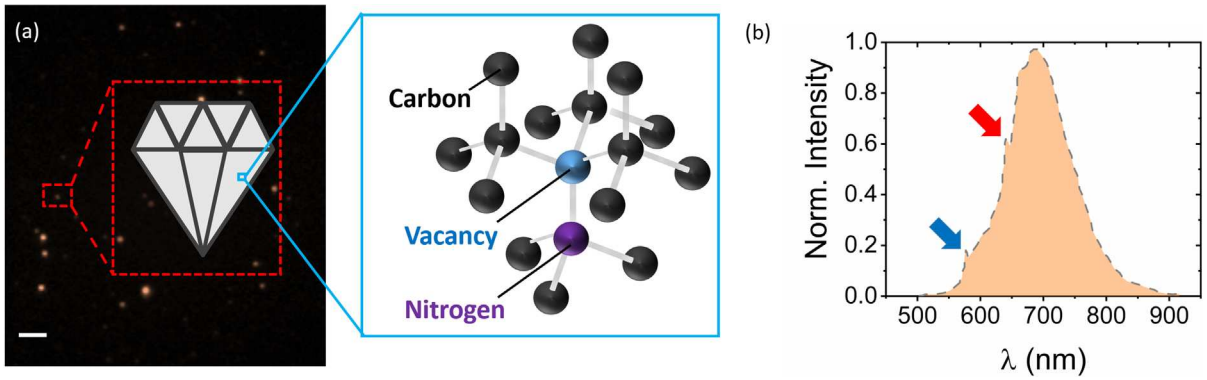


**FIG. 7.** Fluorescence emission of single nanodiamonds. (a) Widefield TIRF image of single nanodiamonds (scale bar = 1 $\mu$m) and inset, structure of the nitrogen-vacancy defect. (b) Normalized fluorescence emission spectra obtained from 100 nm-sized nitrogen-vacancy center fluorescent nanodiamonds at a concentration of 1 mg/mL in ultrapure water ($\lambda_{ex}$ = 532 nm). The emission spectrum displays zero phonon lines at 638 (red arrow) and 575 nm (blue arrow) corresponding to the presence of negatively charged and neutral defects, respectively.

of defects per nanodiamond, while maintaining photostability, and natural extensions are far reaching.

## III. CONJUGATION STRATEGIES FOR SINGLE-MOLECULE PROBES

Coupling the probe of interest can be achieved by direct and indirect labeling methods, but challenges of controlling specificity and defining stoichiometry must be overcome for successful conjugation. In this section, we discuss various labeling methods, highlighting the advantages and limitations of each approach, such that careful selection of the best method can be chosen.

### A. Direct labeling with organic fluorophores

Techniques for chemically attaching organic fluorophores to target biomolecules have been critical for single-molecule imaging applications. Of all the techniques available, the site-specific covalent labeling of proteins with organic dyes has enabled the development of several single-molecule assays.[220] Direct chemical attachment of purified proteins involves targeting the amino acid cysteine and amine groups [Fig. 8(a)]. In cysteine, a free sulfhydryl group can be rapidly cross-linked to an organic dye chemically engineered to contain a thiol-reactive agent such as maleimide, offering a highly specific and rapid labeling reaction under moderate conditions.[47] Surface-accessible cysteines are particularly appealing for labeling because they are found in relatively low abundance. If necessary, they can also be introduced into an amino acid sequence using site-directed mutagenesis,[221] though we again emphasize that care must be taken not to perturb the overall function of the target biomolecule.[222,223] It may also be possible to selectively label a cysteine by inducing conformational changes to improve site accessibility[224] or by manipulating the reversible protection of cysteines using metal ions.[225]

Under all conditions, the target protein must be maintained in a reduced form {using for example, dithiothreitol (DTT) or tris[2-carboxyethyl]phosphine (TCEP)} prior to the labeling reaction in order to prevent the formation of disulfide bridges and cysteine inactivation. Immediately prior to labeling, the reducing agents should be removed to prevent reoxidation and the thiol groups competing with the target thiols on the target biomolecule. Furthermore, the efficient removal of unreacted molecules prior to single-molecule imaging is key to avoid the presence of free dye within the measurement.

In a similar way, amine-reactive conjugates, such as N-hydroxysuccinimide (NHS) ester or isothiocyanates can be used for the specific labeling of lysine or N-terminal amines [Fig. 8(b)].[226,227] However, unlike cysteines, lysines are found in relative abundance and can therefore be problematic when the aim is to directly attach a single probe.

Site-specific conjugation via encoded unnatural amino acids (UAAs) and highly specific biorthogonal reactions also provides a useful way of directly conjugating probes to a protein structure, and in general, this strategy overcomes some of the problems associated with cysteine labeling [Fig. 8(c)].[228] UAAs generally containing ketone, azide, alkyne, or tetrazine groups can be encoded into the protein structure via modification of the cDNA sequence in response to a unique amber stop codon. These groups can then be coupled to functionalized dyes via high-yield click chemistry procedures.[229,230] In general, if the protein only contains1-2 regular amino acids, then these can be replaced with the UAA during protein expression.[231–233]

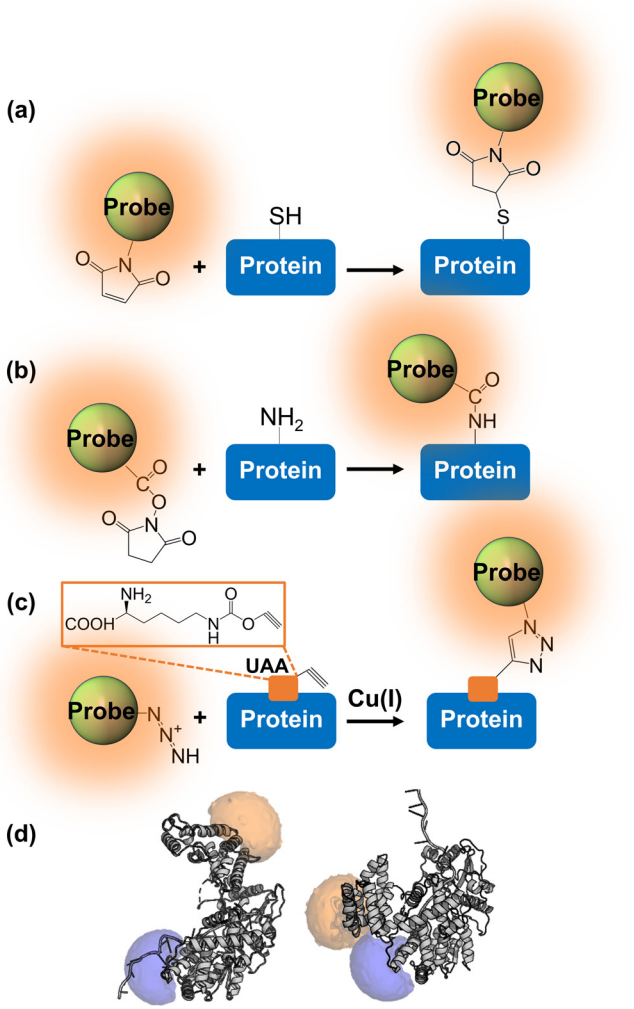


**FIG. 8.** Comparison of commonly used protein labeling methods. Schematic illustrations of labeling reactions involving (a) maleimide functionalized probe and surface accessible cysteine, (b) succinimidyl-ester functionalized probe and amine group and (c) azide functionalized probe and alkyne group on a surface accessible unnatural amino acid. Inset: chemical structure of the UAA propargyl lysine. (d) Accessible volumes of Alexa Fluor 546 (blue) and Alexa Fluor 647 (orange) tagged to Cys97 and Cys473 on the Rep helicase are illustrated as semi-transparent surfaces in the open (left) and closed (right) conformations.[249]

Nonsense codons which encode the UAA selenocysteine (SeC) into the protein structure are particularly attractive due to their ease-of-conjugation toward organic dyes containing maleimide or α-haloketones. By far, the most common UAAs incorporated into protein structure are designed to undergo alkyne-azide click chemistry and useful examples include the labeling of azide-containing UAAs incorporated into the protein structure with Alexa Fluor 488-Alkyne.[234] Here the chemical reaction uses copper as a catalyst and results in a highly selective and strong covalent bond formed between azide and alkyne chemical groups to form stable 1,2,3-triazoles. The UAA p-acetylphenylalanine, for example, can be incorporated into a

protein structure in response to the TAG stop codon, and this reacts well with organic dyes containing hydroxylamine groups, though the reaction must be carried out at low pH.[235] Propargyl lysine is an alternative option used to couple azide-modified fluorophores to the structure via copper catalyzed alkyne-azide cycloaddition [Fig. 8(c)].[236] Efficient incorporation of UAAs into protein structures has enabled a variety of applications, including but not limited to single-molecule FRET studies on the T4 lysozyme,[237] intracellular DNA-PAINT,[238] and the super-resolution imaging of outer-membrane proteins in *E. coli*.[239] To extend their utility further, unnatural fluorescent amino acids, such as Lys(BODIPYFL),[240] 4-cyanotryptophan,[241] and dansyl alanine,[242] have emerged for single-molecule studies of ion-channels and protein folding, and this is an exciting area that warrants further investigation.

For the site specific labeling of DNA and RNA molecules, short nucleic acid oligo inserts can be used. In this case, a nucleic acid sequence can be cut at specific locations by restriction endonucleases to enable short sequences of nucleic acids complementary to a specific oligo sequence to be inserted at that location. Incubation with the oligo will then result in binding to the complementary sequence.[243–245] This is particularly useful since oligos can be modified to include a variety of chemical groups, including biotin, azide, and alkynes, to enable conjugation. Recently, bright and photostable fluorescent RNAs have also facilitated cellular RNA tracking experiments within living systems.[246]

In most cases, and irrespective of the length of the conjugation linker, the fluorophore can conformationally diffuse within an accessible volume around the attachment site [Fig. 8(d)].[32] In the case of FRET-based measurements, this can lead to uncertainties in accurate distance determination and hinder experiments where short distance ranges between the attachment points are required due to dye–dye interactions.[247] It is, therefore, of utmost importance that in such applications, the positional distribution of the dye is assessed via geometric accessible volume simulations,[31,248] provided that the local structure of the biomolecule is known, in order to obtain accurate quantitative details.[33]

## B. Protein tags

Direct protein labeling is often limited by low yield, high levels of impurities or situations where the direct attachment of large fluorophores alters the activity of the biomolecule.[250,251] The use of protein tags, such as the polyhistidine (His) tag [Figs. 9(a) and 9(b)], has thus emerged as powerful tools for overcoming such issues. Here, the low molecular weight tag is attached to recombinantly expressed proteins, enabling downstream labeling to anti-His functionalized probes to be attached with high specificity.[252] For live cell approaches, however, additional methods of labeling are required. Using a strategy complementary to immunostaining or antibody-labeling, a widely adopted strategy to perform site-specific fluorescent labeling of a protein of interest is to express that it is fused with a monovalent tag using a single genetic construct which enables the downstream attachment of a functionalized fluorophore. Among these include SNAP- [Fig. 9(c)] and CLIP-tags, which are derivatives of the 20 kDa DNA repair protein $O^6$-alkylguanine-DNA alkyltransferase.[251] The tags are specifically designed to irreversibly attach to $O^6$-benzylguanine functionalized dyes via a stable thioether bond using a reactive cysteine in the tag.[253] Protein tags have, thus, found applicability in the detection and quantitation of labeled proteins via conventional biochemical methods,

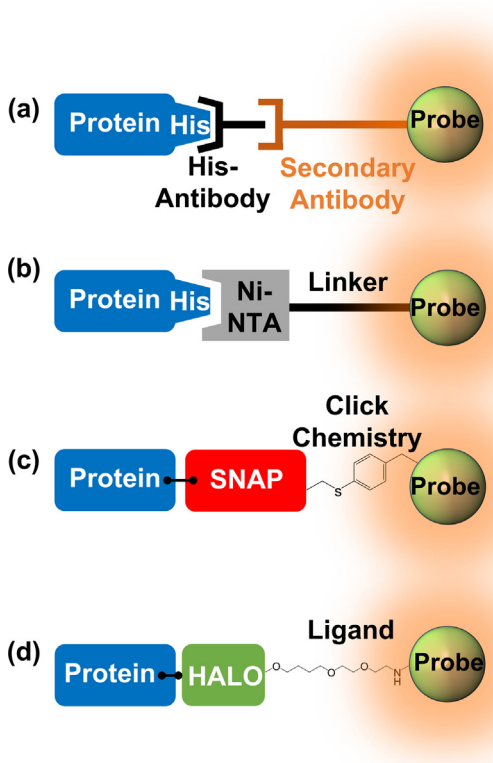


**FIG. 9.** Comparison of protein labeling methods involving protein tags. Schematic illustrations of (a) conventional His-tag antibody coupling, (b) Ni-NTA-linker conjugation, (c) SNAP-tag, and (d) HALO-tag labeling.

such as in-gel fluorescence scanning of SDS-PAGE gels. For single-molecule work, the technique also has particular relevance for the labeling of membrane-bound receptor proteins,[254,255] as well as proteins in sub-cellular compartments.[256,257] A number of live-cell based applications have also highlighted protein tags and applications range from super-resolution imaging,[258] measuring protein activity,[259,260] determining interactions via FRET[261] and particle tracking.[262]

An alternative to the SNAP/CLIP approach is the use of the HaloTag [Fig. 9(d)], a 33 kDa derivative of a bacterial haloalkane dehalogenase enzyme,[263] which forms an irreversible covalent bond between the fused protein and the HaloTag ligand upon binding.[264] Here, a transient alkyl-enzyme intermediate is formed during the displacement of a terminal chloride with Asp106, and since His272 does not catalyze the hydrolysis, a stable covalent bond is formed.[263] Much like the SNAP- and CLIP-tags, only a single genetic construct is required and most are fused directly to the C- or N-terminus, but in contrast, the HaloTag can be used under relatively acidic conditions, opening possibilities for its utility in harsh microenvironments.[265]

Alternative specific labeling strategies involving tetracysteine tags can be used if the methods listed above are unavailable. This approach involves the binding of the membrane permeable fluorescein derivative FlAsH or resofurin derivative ReAsH, to a peptide sequence of the form C–C–X–X–C–C, where C represents Cysteine and X denotes any

amino acid.[266,267] The recognition sequence is typically inserted into solvent accessible, looped or disordered regions on the protein of interest. Both fluorophores are non-emissive in the unbound state and become emissive upon conjugation. This technique has been applied extensively *in vitro* and in cellulo to a range of biological questions including but not limited to single-molecule protein dynamics[268] and protein aggregation.[269]

## IV. ENHANCING PHOTOSTABILITY

Two major problems for single-molecule studies utilizing fluorescent probes are photobleaching and photoblinking. In recent years, the community has made major advances toward solving these problems and a host of novel anti-fading agents have been tested and developed to decrease the rates of bleaching and blinking. Here, we discuss the most popular choices of oxygen scavengers and triplet state quenchers with emphasis placed on their relative benefits.

In the case of photobleaching, the fluorescent probe enters an irreversible non-emissive dark state which limits the time window over which individual molecules can be studied. When photoblinking occurs, reversible transitions to long-lived and non-radiative dark-states complicates, for example, particle tracking and FRET measurements. While the mechanisms by which photobleaching and photoblinking are not entirely defined, and are fluorophore-dependent, it is recognized that molecular oxygen plays a substantial role in the formation of non-emissive states, either via direct interaction with the fluorophore or indirectly by producing free radicals in solution. Consequently, many single-molecule investigations utilizing organic dyes have incorporated the use of oxygen scavengers such as chromatin, cyclooctatetraene, 4-nitrobenzyl alcohol and l-ascorbic acid, either covalently attached to the probe of interest or in free solution.[270,271] However, effectively minimizing molecular oxygen through physical means is challenging and so enzymatic oxygen scavengers are commonly employed instead. For example, the combination of D-glucose, glucose oxidase, and catalase can reduce the molecular oxygen concentration via the coupled reactions though we note use of this system can lead to subtle pH reductions.[272] An alternative strategy making use of protocatechuate-3,4-dioxygenase, protocatechuic acid, pyranose oxidase, catalase, and glucose can further reduce molecular oxygen levels.[273] Furthermore, the addition of the vitamin E analogue 6-hydroxy-2,5,7,8-tetramethylchromane-2-carboxylic acid (Trolox) minimizes photoblinking through a mechanism that involves suppressing the triplet state through electron transfer and recovery of the resulting radical ion by the complementary redox reactions.[274]

Unfortunately, the protection from photoblinking and photobleaching provided by this cocktail is non-existent for fluorescent proteins. To mitigate against this, researchers have often minimized light exposure and/or the sampling frequency, and typically choose fluorescent proteins which are most photostable.[275,276] Careful selection of cell imaging media with selected vitamins (riboflavin and pyridoxal) removed has been found to decrease the photobleaching of GFP relative to conventional buffer solutions while maintaining cell function,[277] and though a number of commercial anti-fade media exist, each is likely to be fluorophore- and cell-dependent.

Fluorescence intermittency has also been universally observed from quantum dots and this of course be a major limitation for long term imaging or tracking experiments. In specific cases, surface passivation of core–shell CdSe/ZnS quantum dots with short chain length thiol moieties was found to suppress photoblinking.[198] Similarly, indium tin oxide nanoparticles suppressed the blinking of CdSeTe/ZnS core–shell quantum dots,[278] though we note that these results are not generalizable to all types of quantum dot. Further experiments demonstrated that surface-modification of core-type CdTe quantum dots with gadolinium ions promotes blinking, which could find useful utility in super-resolution applications.[168]

Other strategies of enhancing photostability, which do not rely on a chemical cocktail, include the fluorination of dyes at the synthesis stage. Polyfluorinated cyanine derivatives upon comparison with non-fluorinated analogues for instance, were found to display at least a ten-fold reduction in aggregation, >10% increase in quantum yield, and fourfold greater resistance to photobleaching due to reduced reactivity toward singlet oxygen. Clearly, all are extremely attractive for single-molecule applications, and are generally attributed to the fluorination of the benzothiazole heterocycles.[279] More recently, organic dyes containing a perfluorophenyl group have also attracted attention because of their enhanced photostability and optical properties. In this regard, ring-perfluorinated trimethine cyanines have been shown to display almost a twofold higher fluorescence quantum yield and lifetime, and 2.5-fold lower nonradiative deactivation rate constant compared with the nonfluorinated version.[280] Other strategies to improve photostability involve introducing electron-deficient substituents to reduce the overall reactivity of the probe toward singlet oxygen,[63] conjugation of the probe to a triplet state quencher,[281] non-covalent encapsulation of the probe into a charged copolymer[282] or nanoparticle,[283] or through nanohybrid formation.[284]

In most applications, removal of photobleaching is desirable. However we note that in the case of single-molecule stepwise photobleaching analysis, where the stoichiometry of a complex containing labeled sub-units is estimated based on the number of photobleaching events,[285] both the labeling and detection efficiencies are critical for accurate estimations.[286]

Single-molecule fluorescence methods are increasingly used across the chemical, biological, and medical sciences, and a growing interest is developing in near-infrared fluorophores as imaging probes, in part because they enable deeper imaging through organic material compared with shorter wavelength probes but also because they generally facilitate higher signal-to-noise ratios due to lower autofluorescence at longer wavelengths. Considering this, the incorporation of oligoglycerol dendrons into such probes has enabled additional improvements in photostability *in vitro* and within living cells relative to conventional cyanines, suggesting this approach may well also be applicable for improving the photostability of a wide range of hydrophobic aromatic probes.[287]

## V. SINGLE-MOLECULE FLUORESCENCE DETECTION

Parallel developments in probe designs, experimental techniques, and computational methods have given rise to a new series of multiplexed, correlative technologies capable of tackling previously intractable biological questions.[288] Improvements in the sensitivity and speed of detectors, the efficiency and stability of excitation sources and microfluidics have all played a role in the development of tools and techniques capable of detecting and manipulating single fluorescently labeled biomolecules at work. While it is out with the scope of this review to list and describe them all, these transformative technologies, which include, but are not limited to TIRF microscopy,[289]

confocal-based multi-parameter fluorescence detection,[290] a suite of super-resolution methods[141,291,292] and fluorescence-integrated optical- and magnetic-based manipulation tools,[293] are contributing enormously to answering long-standing biological questions.[294] At the heart of this is the development of single-molecule probes, without which these fundamental biological processes and functions would remain, for the most part, invisible.

Most single-molecule measurements are performed in biologically relevant solutions, with the target molecule either tethered to a surface or allowed to freely diffuse. In the former case, the most common immobilization strategy involves the tethering of the biomolecule of interest to a surface via biotin-streptavidin interactions, as schematically shown in Fig. 4(d). Here, mixing of a passivation reagent with its biotinylated counterpart and addition of Avidin allows the immobilization of biotinylated molecules via a biotin-avidin linkage with high specificity and affinity ($k_d \sim 10^{-15}$ M).[48] Alternative approaches include the use of covalent-bond-based click-chemistry,[295] encapsulation within lipid vesicles,[296] nonspecific electrostatic interactions with an adsorbed passivation layer[297] or immobilization within a gel;[298] however, in all cases, care must be taken to ensure the immobilization scheme does not hinder biological function and the probe does not interact with the surface. This issue is in part bypassed by detecting freely diffusing biomolecules, though the measurement window is limited by the time spent transiting through the excitation volume. For a typical confocal-based measurement, it is not uncommon for biomolecules to diffuse away from the excitation source within several milliseconds. On the flip side, this also affords an opportunity to gain access to diffusion coefficients and hydrodynamic radii via fluorescence fluctuation correlation spectroscopy and use of the Stokes–Einstein equation.[299–301]

In nearly all cases, and irrespective of the detection scheme used, maximizing the available photon budget and the signal-to-noise ratio is critical for single-molecule detection, especially when sub-millisecond temporal resolution is required. Clearly, this goes hand-in-hand with the need to ensure abundance of the molecule of interest, and a protocol for high labeling efficiency. Nevertheless, this concern ultimately drives the need for brighter and more photostable probes to prolong observation time windows and increase the number of collected photons. While several analytical algorithms have been tailored toward improving the signal-to-noise ratio post-acquisition,[302,303] and probe-free techniques, such as digital holographic[304] and interferometric scattering[305] microscopy, are emerging as promising tools for exploring biomolecular function, the requirement to obtain fluorescent probes with quantum yields approaching unity, while remaining minimally perturbing, remains an active and critical area of research.

Combining research efforts in a range of these different approaches, such as the engineering of new fluorescent probes with enhanced photostability, minimizing background fluorescence, and improving the sensitivity of detectors, will continue to aid maximization of the available photon signal. However, single-molecule experiments are not without limitations. For instance, low signal-to-noise ratios are often observed when fast acquisition rates are used and there is an intrinsic requirement for using the probes under dilute conditions. While a number of analytical tools[3,301,306] have recently been developed to combat the signal-to-noise problem, essentially enabling otherwise hidden information to be obtained from millisecond sampled images, the latter limits the detection scheme to less than a few nanomolar, even when localized excitation is used. Indeed, localization microscopy and particle tracking perform badly if fluorophores are close together in the sample and the limiting concentration depends on the spatial dimensionality of the tagged biomolecule, its mobility, and ability to cluster. While labeling a sub-population can get the concentration of fluorescent species below this limit, the method yields a significant proportion of unlabeled species in the sample, and many of these may potentially have different physical properties to the tagged species. An alternative strategy involves delimited photobleaching whereby a fraction of the fluorophore population is photobleached for a given period prior to localization microscopy. Unfortunately, both methods produce a substantial dark population of the biomolecule under investigation. In this regard, the development of photoactivatable probes has been used in many cases to help alleviate the issue and extend the concentration range for analysis. Super-resolution methods, including photoactivated localization microscopy (PALM) and single-particle tracking, make use of such probes to facilitate investigations into the organization and localization of diffraction-limited fluorescent species in living cells with a density of molecules high enough to provide structural context. When the two methods are combined, information is gained on the positions of single-molecules by activating, localizing and bleaching subsets of for instance, photoactivatable fluorescent proteins.[307] In this regard, we steer the reader to comprehensive reviews[45,308–311] that discuss such approaches, mechanisms of photoactivation, and advantages and limitations of photoactivatable probe designs.

Carefully applied, the combination of single-molecule fluorescent probes, labeling strategy, and immobilization and detection scheme provides a strong platform for understanding the complexities of life's biomolecules in far greater detail than ever before.

## VI. FINAL NOTES

New and exciting technical developments over the last few decades, even those currently at proof-of-principle stage, offer the modern multidisciplinary researcher a wealth of opportunity for characterizing single biomolecules in action, one-at-a-time, bypassing limitations associated with conventional ensemble averaging. Spectroscopic methods that employ single-molecule fluorescent probes, from particle tracking to FRET, not only complement structural and functional characterization methods, but also offer the ability to observe time-dependent, and often, heterogeneous interactions.

The ideal experimental toolbox allowing efficient applications of single-molecule techniques in complex biomolecular systems comprises two major factors: (i) the appropriately selected fluorescent probe(s), which should have sufficient spectroscopic and molecular properties, and (ii) a corresponding, appropriately designed, conjugation scheme. Developments in probe design, coupled with new site-specific labeling procedures, now provide the single-molecule community with a facile yet robust platform for quantitative analyses across a huge range of biomolecules and experimental situations.

Undoubtedly, there are many hurdles yet to overcome, for example, the general issues of increasing probe brightness and photostability; the broader application of single-molecule fluorescent probes for environmental sensing; the requirement to develop minimally invasive labeling schemes; the need for specific targeting of biomolecules within a biological soup; and the need to detect sensitive and transient interactions.

The potential of single-molecule techniques cannot be underestimated, and with new and emerging fluorescent probe designs, the promise of this field is vast. The opportunities presented by combining fluorescence sensing, imaging, and spectroscopic tools with each other, and indeed with others such as atomic force and cryo-electron microscopy, for example, could lead to revolutionary biological insights by unmasking currently intractable information and interactions. In short, fluorescent probes with optimum properties combined with appropriate conjugation strategies are essential for high-quality and insightful single-molecule fluorescence measurements. Small fluorescent probes enable access to the nanoworld and they are helping to resolve our understanding of the biological jigsaw puzzle piece-by-piece. As probe designs evolve further and their applications broaden, fresh ideas and questions will emerge, stimulating the next generation of modern single-molecule biophysical experiments.

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## AUTHOR DECLARATIONS

### Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts to disclose.

### Author Contributions

**Mark Leake:** Conceptualization (equal); Writing – original draft (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal). **Steven D. Quinn:** Conceptualization (equal); Writing – original draft (equal); Writing – review & editing (equal).

## DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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