Crill: A novel technique to characterize nano-ligno-cellulose

Sinke H. Osson, Sven Norgren, Per Engstrand, Mathias Lundberg and Peter Hansen

KEYWORDS: Mechanical pulp fines, Fractionation, Homogenization, Nano-ligno-cellulose, Crill

SUMMARY: The CrillEye is a technique for qualitatively assessing loose slender and fibrillar particles created during pulping. It has also been demonstrated that the crill measurement technique can easily be used to measure the degree of fibrillation of mechanical pulp based nano-ligno-cellulose (NLC). The measurement technique is based on an optical response of a suspension at two wavelengths of light; UV and IR. The UV light contains information on both fibres and crill, while IR only contains information on fibres. The resolution on the CrillEye module is based on optical response of the pulp and on an analogue signal analysis making it concentration independent. Characterization of particle-size distribution of nano-ligno-cellulose is both important and challenging. The objective of the work presented in this paper was to study the crill values of TMP and CTMP based nano-ligno-celluloses as a function of homogenization time. Results showed that the crill value of both TMP-NLC and CTMP-NLC correlated fairly well with the homogenization time.

ADDRESSES OF THE AUTHORS:
Sinke H. Osson (henshaw.sinke@miun.se), Sven Norgren (sven.norgren@miun.se), Per Engstrand (per.engstrand@miun.se), FSCN, Mid Sweden University, 851 70, Sundsvall.
Mathias Lundberg (mathias.lundberg@pulpeye.com): PulpEye AB, Address: Box 279, SE-891 26 ÖRNSKÖLDSVIK, Sweden, Peter Hansen (peter.hansen@innventia.com): INNVENTIA AB, Drottning Kristinas väg 61, Stockholm, Sweden.
Corresponding author: Sinke H. Osson

Research work in the field of microfibrillated cellulose or nanocellulose began in the late 1970s by researchers working at ITT Rayonier Eastern Research Division Laboratory in Whippany, New Jersey, USA (Charreau et al. 2013). They used a mechanical high-pressure homogenizer known as Manton Gaulin-type mill homogenizer to produce thread-like particles referred to as microfibrillated cellulose or nanocellulose. Pulp is disintegrated into loose slender and fibrillar particles known as microfibrillated cellulose (Turba et al. 1983; Herrick et al. 1983). The type of material produced by high shear forces in a high pressure homogenizer or microfluidizer has been called a variety of names such as microfibrillated cellulose or nanocellulose, microfibrillar cellulose, microfibrillized cellulose, nanofibrillated cellulose, nanofibrillary cellulose, nanoscale fibrillar cellulose and cellulosic fibrillar fines (Moon et al. 2011; Hubbe et al. 2008; Siro, Plackett 2010; Siqueira et al. 2010; Eichhorn et al. 2010; Klemm et al. 2011; Charreau et al. 2013). According to Tappi standard (2011) however, it should be called cellulose nanofibrils (CNF) or cellulose microfibrils (CMF).

The production route of microfibrillated cellulose is based on passage of pulp slurries into a high pressure homogenizer. The pulps are usually chemically (Saito et al. 2007) or enzymatically (Henriksson et al. 2007; Pääkkö et al. 2007) pre-treated in a way to; lower energy consumption, improve fibrillation and also to avoid fibre clogging. It is well known that, the rate of fibrillation is dependent on the pressure drop and the number of homogenisation passes. Mechanical pulps are not easy to treat in the homogenizer to form well fibrillated fibrils. This is because of the cellulose/hemicellulose/lignin interaction, the lignin in the pulp acts as a gluing substance to cellulose thus preventing the cellulose molecules from complete individualization, thereby forming fibril bundles.

Nowadays, in pulp mills, optical analyzers are often used for fibre characterisation in order to determine particle size (fibre length, width and fibre wall thickness) distribution of pulps in the micron-scale. However, with these methods, it is not possible to effectively measure fibre size distribution in the submicron or nano -scale. The CrillEye module of the PulpEye® analyzer could be an instrument to tackle this limitation of optical analyzers in relation to particle size. The resolution on the CrillEye module is based on optical response of the pulp and on an analogue signal analysis making it concentration independent. The Crill module is dependent on the wavelength of light (non-polarized light), surface chemistry of the particles in the pulp and the signal filtering and analysis.

Most of the optical analyzers such as Kajaani FiberLab, MorFi and Fibermaster can be used to measure fibre length, width, and fibre wall thickness of various types of
pulp samples. These instruments categorize fines as particles that are less than 0.20 mm in length (Guay et al. 2005). But it has been noticed that these optical analyzing equipments cannot effectively measure very thin and slender particles, i.e. particles less than 0.20 mm in length. The main reason could be due to their poor resolution. Guay et al. (2005) have reported the resolutions of these optical analyzers as such: Kajaani FiberLab (10 µm, using a polarized light source), MorFi (4 µm, using a non-polarized light source) and Fibermaster (26 µm, using a non-polarized light source) operating with a normal camera. However, with the CrillEye module, it is possible to measure very thin and slender pulp particles down to 0.20 µm in thickness.

During the last three decades several methods have been used to characterize microfibrillated cellulose including the microscopical techniques which qualitatively assess the degree of fibrillation of cellulose nanofibris. The main draw-back of the microscopical technique (image analysis) is that it is not always suitable in relation to quality control in the industry. An alternative method to the microscopical technique could be the crill measurement method. This technique does not require image analysis thereby making it a very fast method and this enables it for quality adjustment in online process. It has also been shown that the technique is used in qualitatively assessing hairy fibres during pulp processing and could thus, be used in the mill for quality control during refining (Pettersson 2010). The crill was first described by Steenberg et al. (1960) as loose slender and fibrillar particles. Steenberg et al. (1960) mentioned that the name “crill” is derived from the Norwegian term denoting a pelagic organism. Historically, the crill measurement method, developed by PulpEye AB, uses the method from the Innventia (former STFI) OptoCrill developed in the early 1980s by Thorulf Pettersson and co-workers. The development resulted in signal analysis methodology that was awarded the Wallenberg Prize in 1995 and was the foundation for a series of measurement systems developed in the 1980s. The fast development of computers, image analysis and CCD-cameras, however, favored the development of image based measurements techniques. The crill measurement was brought to attention again by Ulla-Britt Mohlin in the research program on LC-refining at Innventia during 2003-2011. The methodology was transferred to PulpEye AB during 2012 by financial support from VINNOVA. Characterization of particle-size distribution of nano-ligno-cellulose is both important and challenging.

The objective of the work presented in this paper was to study the crill values of TMP and CTMP based nano-ligno-celluloses as a function of homogenization time. In this investigation, the term nano-ligno-cellulose (NLC) is used and not the commonly used names such microfibrillated cellulose or nanocellulose.

**Materials and Methods**

**Thermo-mechanical pulp (TMP)**

The TMP sample used in this work was collected from SCA pulp mill at Örtviken, Sundsvall, Sweden. It has a Canadian Standard Freeness (CSF) value of 60 ml, wood type is 100% fresh Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) produced for newsprint grade. The pulp was stored in a refrigerator before use. The nanocellulose produced from TMP is referred to as TMP-NLC in this work.

**Chemi-thermomechanical pulp (CTMP)**

The CTMP sample used in this investigation was obtained from SCA Östrand pulp mill, Sundsvall, Sweden. The wood material used was solely never-dried fresh Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), with a high Canadian Standard Freeness (CSF) of about 619 ml and an ISO brightness of 76%. The pulp was stored in a refrigerator before use. The nanocellulose produced from CTMP is referred to as CTMP-NLC in this work.

**Britt Dynamic Drainage Jar (BDDJ) fractionation**

In this paper, the pulps were fractionated using a specially designed BDDJ at the SCA Research Centre in Sundsvall, with a capacity of 8 litres. Pulps were disintegrated at 30 000 number of revolutions and diluted using 8 litres of tap water. 30 g of pulp (o.d.) was used for each fractionation. The fine fractions were obtained from the pulp samples by BDDJ fractionation technique. The fractions passing through the 30 mesh wire screen are regarded as “fines” while the retained fractions on the 30 mesh wire screen were discarded. The cut-off or pore size of the BDDJ 30mesh screen was approximately 600 µm. The reason for fibre fractionation is to obtain short and tiny fibres that could be easily homogenized.

**Homogenization**

A GEAA Niro Soavi homogenizer (ARIETE, Model: NS2006H, Serial Number: 8755, 2010, Parma-Italy) was used to produce nano-ligno-cellulose. The working principle of the high pressure homogenizer is that it subjects the pulp slurries to high impact force and high shear rate due to the reciprocating action within the valves. The pulp suspension undergoes the process of high pressure micronization to reduce the size of the fibres so as to obtain a stable suspension. The homogenization experiments in this study were performed using thermo-mechanical pulp and chemi-thermo mechanical pulp fines. A schematic diagram of a high pressure homogenizing equipment is shown in Fig 1a. The pulp slurries were treated in the homogenizing equipment at approximately 1% consistency for 120 min; and at a homogenization pressure in the range of 200-300 bars (Table 1).

**Table 1 - Pulp sample homogenisation conditions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pulp Number</th>
<th>Pulp Description</th>
<th>Homogenisation temperature (°C)</th>
<th>Homogenisation pressure (bars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>TMP</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>200-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>TMP</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>200-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>CTMP</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>200-300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>CTMP</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>200-300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PulpEye® - CrillEye

The crill has been used for chemical pulp evaluation, and it is for this reason that we have placed more attention on crill measurement related to nano-ligno-cellulose. As for any online measurement, the technique used should be robust, precise, fast and stable during production. The crill measurements were done at Dynäs Mondi Mill in Kramfors, Sweden, and the measurement was done manually (offline). To the best of our knowledge, no articles are available concerning the measurement of crill using mechanical pulp based nano-ligno-cellulose. In this study a PulpEye® Online Analyzer (PulpEye AB, 2005, Örnsköldsvik-Sweden) was used in characterising the crill value of the microfibrils or the nano-ligno-cellulose suspension. 1 g dry solid content of NLC was used in all investigations. For the fibre quality measurement using the PulpEye Analyzer, 20 g oven dried pulp was used in all investigations. The measurement of crill is based on optical response of a suspension at two wavelengths of light; UV and IR. The UV light contains information on both the total fibres and the crill, while IR only contains information on fibres (Fig 1b). KFP = “crill value”, and is a concentration independent ratio which takes into account the UV value (fibre + crill area) divided by the IR value (fibre area) (Hansen, Sundvall 2012). Table 1 list the various pulp types analyzed during this project.

Results and Discussion

This work describes a new approach of assessing fibrillation efficiency of macroscopic pulp fibres to sub microfibrils as a function of the number of homogenization passes (time). The working principle of the high pressure homogenizer is that it subjects the pulp fibres to high impact force and high shear rate due to the reciprocating action within the valves, see Fig 1a. The fibre suspension undergoes the process of high pressure treatment to reduce the size of the fiber particle in the sub-micron scale. The valve seats in the homogenizer experience an increase in temperature with time during operation; the homogenizer in this project works conveniently at room temperature (23°C) as well at high temperature (140°C). It is seen in Fig 2-5 that as the number of homogenization passes increases, the fibrillation efficiency is improved.

Results from the PulpEye® analyzer are given in Table 2. The results show that the fibre TMP had a fibre length of 1.25 mm and 42.3% amount of fines meanwhile, CTMP had an average fibre length of 1.74 mm and 30.7% fine content (Table 2).

Experimental results from crill measurements are presented and discussed in Fig 2-5 based on data obtained from the CrillEye module of the PulpEye® Online Analyzer. The aim of the study was to measure the crill value of thermo-mechanical pulp (TMP) and chemi-thermomechanical pulp (CTMP) based nano-ligno-cellulose and relate this with the number of homogenization passes (time). The two main challenges involve during homogenization are the huge amount of energy consumption and fibre clogging (Herrick et al. 1983; Turbak et al. 1983; Ankerfors 2012). Most of the energy losses in the homogenizer are due to friction that occurs at the seats, valves and impact ring. As the number of homogenization passes of the pulp suspension increases, the amount of energy consumption also increases. The clogging blocks the flow of pulp suspension and renders the process to become unstable, and hence the whole assembly needs dismantling and re-assembly. It has been demonstrated that the crill measurement technique can easily be used to measure the degree of fibrillation of NLC. The results showed that the crill value of both TMP-NLC and CTMP-NLC correlated fairly well with the homogenization time. The increasing trend of the crill value is more pronounced within the first 20 min of homogenization for all the samples.

Table 2 - Fibre characterisation using PulpEye® Analyzer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pulp samples</th>
<th>Freeness/ SR (ml)</th>
<th>Fibre length (mm)</th>
<th>Fibre width (µm)</th>
<th>Curl (%)</th>
<th>Fines (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TMP</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>42.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CTMP</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>1.74</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SR = Schopper-Riegler.
A commercial online crill sensor was used to qualitatively evaluate the fibre-size distribution of the nano-ligno-cellulose suspension. Results showed that the crill value correlated fairly well with the homogenization time (Fig 2-5). The measuring principle of the crill value is schematically illustrated in Fig 1b. The crill sensor makes measurements of crill both rapidly and frequently, which means that it is very suitable for online applications. The results from the crill value measurements are presented and discussed based on the data obtained from the crill module of the PulpEye® Analyzer.

Fig 2-5 show the results from crill measurement of mechanical pulp based microfibrils using the PulpEye® - CrillEye Instrument. In these figures, the crill values have been plotted against the homogenization time. In Fig 2, the initial crill value was 227 and after 50 min homogenisation time, the crill value rose to 254, showing an approximate 11% increment. When the homogenization time was further increased to 120 min, the crill value was increased by 39 units, indicating an almost 17% improvement in crill.

When increasing the homogenization temperature from 23 to 140 °C, there seems to be no major difference in the crill value for the respective pulp samples (TMP and CTMP). But there is a large difference in crill value between the TMP and the CTMP based nano-ligno-cellulose. There are at least two possible explanations for the difference in crill value for TMP and CTMP based nano-ligno-cellulose. One is that both pulps have different degree of refining and/or chemical pretreatment during pulp production. Another explanation is due to difference in pulp chemistry; i.e. the introduction of anionically charged groups onto the lignin molecules.

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the samples. There was no significant difference in relation to temperature level treatment in the homogenizer, the crill value showed pretty similar development. It should however be noted that the temperature is rising quite rapidly during homogenisation thereby resulting in the effect that the final temperature when starting at room temperature is in the range of 55 to 65°C. This could mean that we may have enough softened lignin in the treated material even if we start at room temperature.

Conclusions
A comparison between the crill value versus the homogenization time of TMP-NLC and CTMP-NLC, homogenized at both 23°C and 140°C, show a relatively close agreement. The CrillEye technique is known to be a fast and robust method for obtaining reliable data. Crill data presented in this work indicates that the fibrillation efficiency is good enough after the first 20 min of homogenization. More data are however needed for the development of reliable results for mechanical pulp based nano-ligno-cellulose, in order to prove this technique for commercial application.

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Literature


Tappi (2011): Roadmap for the development of international standards for nanocellulose, Tappi’s International nanotechnology Division


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