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Opinion Article

Bioinspired Microchannel Cooling Networks for High Power Electronic Systems

Nathaniel Brooks*

Department of Thermal and Fluid Engineering, Westbridge Institute of Advanced Technology, Toronto, Canada

DESCRIPTION

High power electronic systems used in aerospace avionics, electric propulsion units, high frequency radar modules, and data center computing platforms generate substantial heat due to intense electrical activity within densely packed circuit architectures. As device integration continues to increase, heat flux levels within localized regions have reached values that exceed the capability of conventional cooling methods. Effective thermal regulation has therefore become a critical engineering requirement for ensuring operational stability, performance reliability, and long-term system durability. Among emerging solutions, bioinspired microchannel cooling networks have gained attention for their ability to mimic natural fluid transport structures found in biological organisms, enabling highly efficient heat dissipation through optimized flow distribution and surface area utilization.

Microchannel cooling systems consist of networks of small fluid passages embedded within or attached to heat-generating components. These channels allow coolant fluids to absorb and transport thermal energy away from electronic devices. The fundamental advantage of microchannel structures lies in their high surface area to volume ratio, which significantly enhances heat transfer efficiency compared to conventional bulk cooling methods. However, as system complexity increases, achieving uniform flow distribution and minimizing pressure losses becomes a major design challenge. Bioinspired design principles draw inspiration from natural systems such as leaf venation patterns, blood vessel networks, and respiratory structures found in living organisms. These biological systems have evolved over time to achieve highly efficient transport of fluids, nutrients, and gases with minimal energy expenditure. By replicating similar branching and hierarchical structures, engineers can develop cooling networks that distribute coolant more evenly across thermal hotspots while maintaining low pumping power requirements.

One of the key characteristics of biological transport systems is hierarchical branching. In leaf veins, for example, large primary channels divide into progressively smaller secondary and tertiary branches, ensuring that fluid reaches all regions of the leaf surface. This principle can be applied to microchannel cooling systems by designing primary inlet channels that divide into multiple smaller pathways, ensuring uniform coolant distribution across electronic surfaces. Such designs reduce localized overheating and improve overall thermal consistency. Flow uniformity is essential in high power electronic cooling because uneven distribution of coolant can lead to temperature gradients that negatively affect component performance. Regions with insufficient cooling may experience accelerated degradation, while overcooled regions may operate inefficiently. Bioinspired channel layouts address this issue by balancing hydraulic resistance across all branches of the network, ensuring that coolant flow is evenly distributed throughout the system.

Pressure drop is another important factor in microchannel cooling design. As channel dimensions decrease, fluid resistance increases, requiring higher pumping power to maintain adequate flow rates. Excessive pressure drop can reduce system efficiency and increase operational energy consumption. Bioinspired structures help mitigate this issue by optimizing channel geometry and branching angles to reduce flow resistance while maintaining effective heat transfer performance. Thermal boundary layer development plays a significant role in determining heat transfer efficiency within microchannels. As coolant flows through narrow channels, a thermal boundary layer forms along channel walls, reducing heat transfer effectiveness over distance. To counteract this effect, designs often incorporate secondary flow structures, surface textures, or branching disruptions that enhance fluid mixing and reduce boundary layer thickness. These modifications improve convective heat transfer rates and maintain consistent cooling performance.

Material selection for microchannel cooling systems is critical due to the need for high thermal conductivity, corrosion resistance, and mechanical stability. Metals such as copper and aluminum are commonly used due to their favorable thermal properties. In advanced applications, composite materials and ceramic substrates are also employed to improve durability under high temperature and chemically reactive environments. Material compatibility with coolant fluids must also be considered to prevent degradation over time. Coolant selection significantly influences system performance. Water-based coolants provide

Correspondence to: Nathaniel Brooks, Department of Thermal and Fluid Engineering, Westbridge Institute of Advanced Technology, Toronto, Canada, E-mail: nathaniel.brooks@wiatech-toronto.ca

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high thermal capacity but may present corrosion risks if not properly managed. Dielectric fluids are used in applications where electrical insulation is required, such as direct immersion cooling of electronic components. These fluids offer stable thermal performance while preventing electrical interference, making them suitable for sensitive high power electronic systems. This enables greater flexibility in implementing bioinspired designs with intricate branching patterns. Numerical simulation plays an essential role in optimizing microchannel cooling systems. Computational fluid dynamics models are used to analyze fluid flow behavior, pressure distribution, and temperature fields within channel networks. These simulations allow engineers to evaluate different geometric configurations and identify designs that maximize heat transfer efficiency while minimizing pressure losses. Multi-objective optimization techniques are often applied to balance competing design requirements.

CONCLUSION

Integration of microchannel cooling systems into electronic assemblies requires careful design coordination. The cooling network must be positioned close enough to heat-generating components to ensure effective thermal coupling while avoiding interference with electrical routing and mechanical structures. In compact systems, multi-layer integration techniques are used to embed cooling channels within circuit boards or structural substrates. As electronic systems continue to evolve toward higher power densities and smaller form factors, the importance of advanced thermal management solutions such as bioinspired microchannel cooling networks will continue to grow. Their ability to combine efficient heat transfer with compact structural design makes them a promising approach for next-generation high performance electronic applications.