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General Electric's Dr. James M. Lafferty uses metal compounds to achieve reliable electron emission

For as long as they have known how to make vacuum tubes, scientists have been seeking cathodes combining high emission with low evaporation—materials that will give off many electrons, but few atoms. Because of their emission efficiency, oxide cathodes always have received most of the research attention. Now, however, Dr. James M. Lafferty of the General Electric Research Laboratory is taking an entirely new look at the problem. He has developed cathodes made of metallic compounds which are chemically stable and demonstrate low evaporation rates at current densities where oxide cathodes evaporate too quickly to be useful. These features have made Dr. Lafferty's lanthanum boride emitters indispensable in the electron guns used for high-energy accelerators and other systems where stability is required under difficult conditions. Using interstitial compounds, scientists can build a cagelike framework around the atoms of metals known to be good emitters; the framework acts as a "sieve," which lets electrons pass through, but holds back evaporation of the atoms themselves. Dr. Lafferty's metallic emitters are now beginning to approach oxide cathodes in efficiency, while surpassing them in long-life reliability.

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