Beyond cavity-defined repetition rates: Toward time-programmable laser physics

Lei Dong[1,2,3,*] and Suotang Jia[1,2,3]

[1]State Key Laboratory of Quantum Optics Technologies and Devices, Institute of Laser Spectroscopy, Shanxi University, Taiyuan 030006, China

[2]Collaborative Innovation Center of Extreme Optics, Shanxi University, Taiyuan 030006, China

[3]International Joint Laboratory on Laser Carbon Monitoring Technology, Shanxi University, Taiyuan 030006, China

*Correspondence: donglei@sxu.edu.cn

Received: June 4, 2026; Accepted: July 29, 2026; Published Online: July 29, 2026; https://doi.org/10.59717/j.tip.2026.100007

Citation: Dong L. and Jia S. (2026). Beyond cavity-defined repetition rates: Toward time-programmable laser physics. *The Innovation Physics* **1**:100007.

For more than six decades, the optical cavity has served as both the foundation and the fundamental constraint of laser operation. By defining the resonant frequencies that can oscillate within a gain medium, the cavity determines the spectral and temporal characteristics of laser emission, including the repetition rate of mode-locked pulses and the spacing of optical frequency combs. Although remarkable advances have been achieved in frequency-comb technologies, from precision metrology to molecular spectroscopy and optical communications, their fundamental operation remains closely tied to cavity-defined resonances.

In a recent Nature article, Senica and colleagues reported a striking departure from this long-standing paradigm by demonstrating continuously tunable coherent pulse generation in a monolithic semiconductor laser.[1] Rather than modifying the cavity itself, the authors imposed a microwave-driven spatiotemporal gain modulation across the entire laser cavity, enabling coherent pulse trains with continuously tunable repetition rates from 4 GHz to 16 GHz and frequency combs with correspondingly tunable mode spacings. This achievement represents more than an incremental improvement in laser performance. It introduces a significant new degree of freedom for photonic engineering, which is direct control of intracavity pulse dynamics through distributed spatiotemporal modulation.

Here, we argue that this work marks a conceptual transition from cavity-defined laser physics to time-programmable laser physics, in which external temporal signals, rather than static cavity geometry, dynamically determine optical time-frequency structure (Figure 1). This places the advance within the broader context of programmable photonics and time-varying electromagnetic systems.

The concept of an optical cavity lies at the heart of laser physics. Resonant boundary conditions determine which optical frequencies can oscillate, producing a discrete set of longitudinal modes separated by the cavity free spectral range. For mode-locked lasers, this spacing directly defines the repetition frequency of the generated pulse train. Consequently, a fixed cavity length implies a fixed repetition rate. While modest tuning can be achieved through thermal, mechanical, or electro-optic approaches, large and continuous changes typically require complex external-cavity architectures. This limitation has influenced the design of frequency-comb systems for decades.

The work by Senica et al. challenges this assumption. Instead of treating the cavity as a static structure, the authors effectively transform it into a dynamic medium whose gain profile evolves in both space and time. Under such conditions, pulse propagation is no longer governed solely by the cavity geometry. The optical waveform becomes synchronized to a traveling gain landscape generated by the externally applied microwave signal. The key innovation is the creation of a distributed traveling gain window along the entire semiconductor laser cavity. In conventional active mode locking, modulation is confined to a small section of the resonator and must be

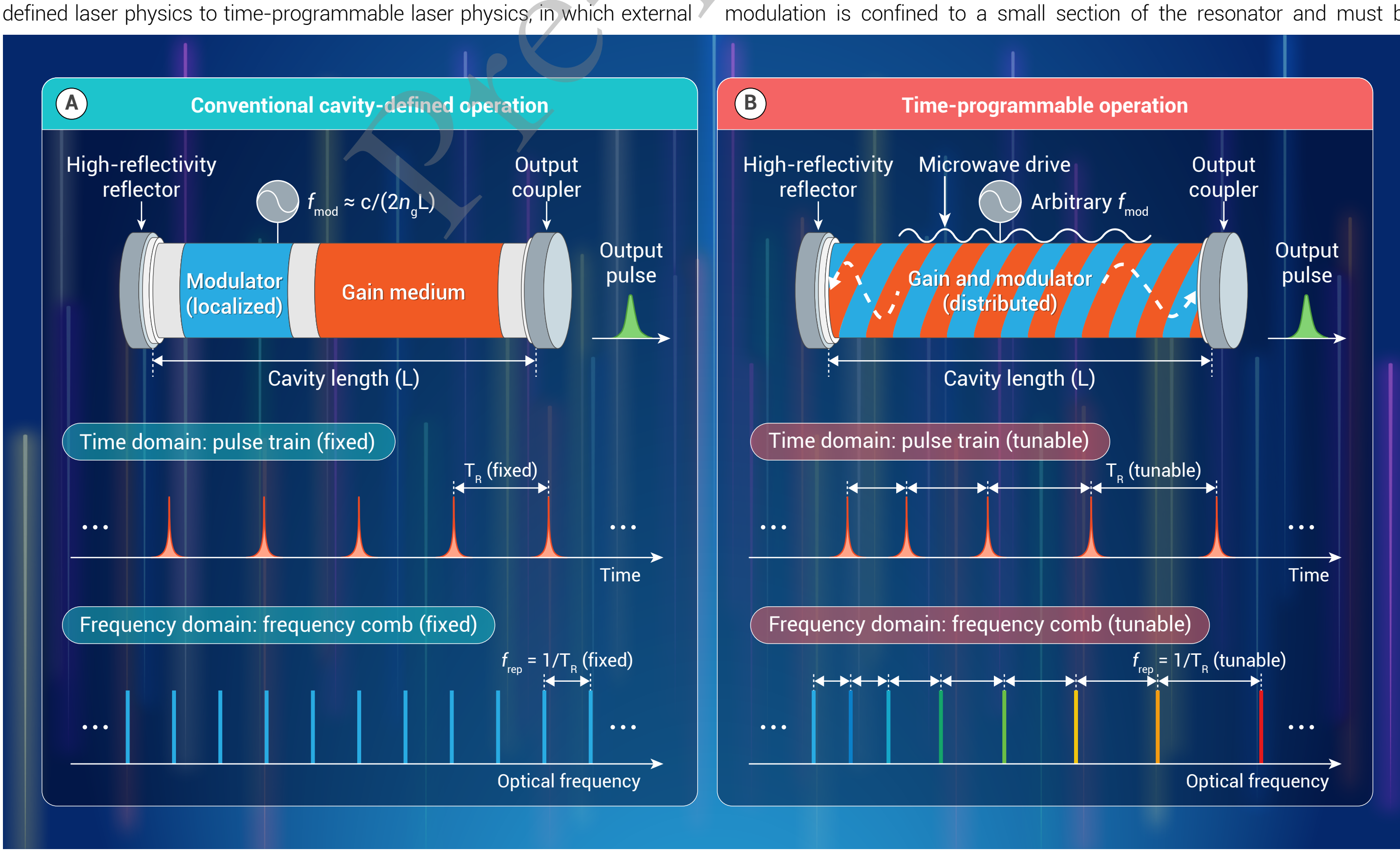

Figure 1. From cavity-defined to time-programmable laser operation (A) In conventional semiconductor frequency combs, the pulse repetition rate and comb spacing are fixed by the cavity geometry and resonance condition. (B) In a spatiotemporally modulated laser cavity, a microwave-driven traveling gain window dynamically controls intracavity pulse propagation, enabling electronic tuning of pulse repetition rates and corresponding frequency-comb spacings without changing the cavity length.

synchronized to the cavity round-trip frequency. Significant detuning rapidly destroys pulse formation. By contrast, distributed modulation introduces a qualitatively different regime. When the modulation frequency exceeds the natural cavity repetition rate, the gain window travels faster than the optical pulse. The leading edge of the pulse experiences more gain than the trailing edge, effectively accelerating the pulse. When the modulation frequency is lower, the opposite process occurs and the pulse slows down. This "pulse-pulling" mechanism continuously adjusts the pulse group velocity until synchronization with the external microwave frequency is achieved. The resulting laser no longer operates strictly on cavity-determined longitudinal modes. Instead, the microwave drive becomes the dominant factor controlling temporal periodicity and comb spacing.

From a conceptual perspective, this represents a shift from resonator-defined photonics toward dynamically programmable photonics. The experimentally demonstrated tuning from 4 to 16 GHz around a natural repetition frequency of 6.61 GHz is particularly significant. This range is not a small perturbation of the cavity free spectral range but rather a fourfold electronic reconfiguration of the laser repetition rate. The resulting system substantially relaxes the traditional link between repetition-rate selection and geometric cavity length, shifting a significant portion of temporal control toward electronic programmability.

Frequency combs have become indispensable tools in precision science.[2] Yet many applications remain limited by the fixed mode spacing imposed by conventional cavities. For spectroscopy, fixed comb spacing often creates sampling gaps that restrict spectral resolution. Researchers have developed sophisticated approaches such as dual-comb spectroscopy to overcome these limitations[3], but these systems typically require multiple stabilized lasers and complex synchronization schemes. Continuously tunable comb spacing offers an alternative strategy. By electronically varying the microwave modulation frequency, the comb can sweep through intermediate spectral positions without mechanical tuning or multiple laser sources. This capability could significantly simplify high-resolution spectroscopy and enable gap-free spectral measurements. The impact may be even greater in dual-comb systems.[4] Current implementations often rely on maintaining a precisely controlled difference between two repetition frequencies. A laser platform capable of arbitrary electronic repetition-rate tuning could dramatically simplify this process, potentially reducing both system complexity and cost.

Beyond spectroscopy, electronically reconfigurable combs offer near-term opportunities for compact sensing and simplified dual-comb systems, with longer-term potential in adaptive communications and reconfigurable information processing. The broader significance, however, lies in a paradigm shift: over the past decade, photonics has moved toward programmability — in programmable photonic integrated circuits, reconfigurable metasurfaces, and software-defined optical networks — but always outside the light source. Senica et al. bring programmability directly into the laser cavity itself, allowing a single device to access multiple operational states through electronic control rather than requiring different devices for different functions.

This perspective aligns closely with recent developments in time-varying and spatiotemporally modulated photonic systems.[5] Across a broad range of electromagnetic platforms, temporal modulation has emerged as a powerful mechanism for creating functionalities inaccessible to static structures, including nonreciprocal wave propagation, synthetic dimensions, and dynamic control of wave dispersion. The present work extends these concepts into the domain of coherent semiconductor lasers, demonstrating that temporal modulation can fundamentally reshape intracavity dynamics and redefine how laser states are selected. In this sense, the reported device may represent one of the earliest examples of a time-programmable laser architecture, where software-controlled microwave signals determine optical functionality. Such systems may eventually evolve toward more advanced programmable optical platforms capable of generating a wider range of temporal states. However, the generation of truly user-defined pulse patterns and application-specific waveforms remains a long-term objective that has not yet been experimentally demonstrated. At present, it also remains unclear how far such programmability can be extended while preserving coherence, stability, and reproducibility. Whether distributed modulation can support genuinely arbitrary optical-state generation remains an open research question.

Despite its promise, several important challenges must be addressed before time-programmable laser architectures can achieve widespread adoption. First, the current demonstration was realized under cryogenic conditions, and whether such large tuning can be reproduced in room-temperature platforms remains a critical question. Although the underlying physical mechanism is not fundamentally restricted to this platform, experimental validation in room-temperature semiconductor lasers remains essential. Demonstrating similar functionality in near-infrared diode lasers or integrated photonic platforms would substantially broaden the technological impact of the concept. Second, distributed spatiotemporal modulation introduces new engineering requirements. Efficient microwave delivery, impedance matching, and microwave-photonic co-design become critical aspects of device performance. As modulation frequencies and integration densities increase, power consumption and thermal management may emerge as important constraints. From an application perspective, several important performance metrics remain to be evaluated. For spectroscopy and dual-comb implementations, practical utility will depend not only on repetition-rate tunability but also on comb bandwidth, linewidth, phase noise, mutual coherence, tuning speed, and absolute frequency accuracy. Likewise, integration into compact photonic platforms will require careful consideration of thermal management, microwave power consumption, and system-level compatibility. Third, continuous tunability does not automatically imply arbitrary programmability. Future research must establish whether modulation waveforms can be used to reliably generate more complex optical states while preserving coherence, stability, linewidth performance, and long-term reproducibility. The transition from continuously tunable operation to genuinely programmable optical functionality remains an open challenge. Nevertheless, the conceptual foundation established by this work is remarkably broad. The key requirement is not a specific gain medium but the ability to generate controlled spatiotemporal gain modulation across a multimode laser cavity. Such conditions could potentially be realized in semiconductor laser platforms spanning terahertz, mid-infrared, near-infrared, and visible wavelength regimes. However, experimental validation across these diverse material platforms remains necessary, and platform-specific limitations may ultimately constrain achievable tuning performance.

The work of Senica and colleagues suggests that dynamic spatiotemporal control may become the next major frontier in laser science. By demonstrating that coherent pulse trains and frequency combs can be governed by traveling gain landscapes rather than fixed cavity resonances, they reveal a path toward laser systems whose temporal and spectral properties are defined electronically rather than geometrically. Importantly, the significance of this work extends beyond tunable repetition rates. By demonstrating that temporal modulation can directly determine laser operating states, it suggests that future semiconductor lasers may increasingly incorporate software-defined temporal control, although the achievable degree of programmability remains to be demonstrated experimentally.

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FUNDING AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was supported by the National Natural Science Foundation of China (62235010, 62505163, 62501370, 62475137, 62405042); Shanxi Provincial Special Fund for Scientific and Technological Cooperation and Exchange (202404041101022, 202304041101019). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

L.D. drafted the manuscript; S.J. revised it. Both authors contributed to the manuscript and approved the final version.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests.