A Hydrodynamic Interpretation of Vacuum Impedance: Deriving μ_0 and ϵ_0 from the Mechanical Properties of a Scalar Field

Boris Kulangiev
Haifa, Israel

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Abstract

Background: In standard quantum electrodynamics (QED), vacuum permittivity (ϵ_0) and permeability (μ_0) are often treated as fundamental dimensional constants. While mathematically robust, this treatment lacks an underlying mechanical description of the vacuum substrate itself.

Methods: We propose a hydrodynamic interpretation of the vacuum state by modeling it as a Lorentz-covariant scalar field. We establish a formal isomorphism where Maxwell's constants map directly to fluid dynamic parameters: μ_0 corresponds to inertial mass density (ρ) and ϵ_0 corresponds to elastic compliance (κ). Lorentz invariance is preserved through an effective acoustic metric that reduces to the Minkowski metric in the vacuum ground state.

Results: Within this framework, the characteristic impedance of free space ($Z_0 \approx 377\Omega$) emerges as the acoustic impedance of the scalar fluid. We derive a quantitative prediction for a local impedance shift (ΔZ) in constrained geometries, such as Casimir cavities. Specifically, we provide an observable phase signature ($\Delta\phi_{obs}$) for multipass XUV interferometry, demonstrating that a 5 nm cavity gap yields a signal-to-noise ratio approaching unity. Furthermore, we identify the fine structure constant α as a hydrodynamic coupling efficiency related to quantized vortex filaments.

Conclusion: This isomorphism provides a consistent mechanical basis for wave propagation and mass generation while maintaining the predictive accuracy of QED. By offering a falsifiable bridge to next-generation vacuum interferometry, this model suggests that the fundamental constants of electromagnetism are emergent properties of a structured vacuum substrate.

1 Introduction

The impedance of free space, denoted as Z_0, is a fundamental constant in electromagnetism and quantum electrodynamics (QED), with an approximate value of $376.73\,\Omega$ [1]. In the framework of Maxwell's equations, it is defined by the ratio of the vacuum permeability (μ_0) to the vacuum permittivity (ϵ_0):

$$Z_0 = \sqrt{\frac{\mu_0}{\epsilon_0}} = \mu_0 c \approx 377\,\Omega \tag{1}$$

where c is the speed of light in vacuum. Furthermore, QED establishes a direct relationship between this impedance and the fundamental constants of quantum mechanics, specifically the fine structure constant (α) and the von Klitzing constant ($R_K = h/e^2$):

$$Z_0 = 2\alpha R_K \tag{2}$$

While these relationships are mathematically robust and experimentally verified, the *physical interpretation* of vacuum impedance remains conceptually abstract. in classical transmission line theory, characteristic impedance arises from the physical properties of the medium—specifically, the distributed inductance (inertia) and capacitance (elasticity) per unit length. However, when applied to the vacuum, the concept of "resistance" or "impedance" is often treated as an intrinsic property of empty space, devoid of a constituent medium. This presents an ontological gap: how can a vacuum, defined by the absence of matter, exhibit a finite, non-zero resistance to the propagation of electromagnetic fields?

Standard interpretations often relegate μ_0 and ϵ_0 to the status of dimensional constants required to reconcile units. However, the precise definition of Z_0 suggests that the vacuum possesses inherent mechanical parameters analogous to those of a physical substrate. Einstein himself noted that "space without ether is unthinkable" in the context of General Relativity [2], implying that spacetime must possess physical qualities to support curvature and wave propagation.

In this paper, we propose a **Hydrodynamic Interpretation** of the vacuum state. While the structural isomorphism between the electromagnetic wave equation and acoustic propagation is a well-established mathematical feature of standard continuum mechanics, this paper extends this formal analogy beyond mere relabeling. We utilize this mathematical equivalence as a foundational premise to deduce the mechanical boundary conditions, topological constraints, and measurable phase signatures of the vacuum state. We posit that the vacuum can be modeled as a Lorentz-covariant scalar fluid, where the electromagnetic constants are not arbitrary algebraic values, but emergent mechanical properties of a physical substrate. Specifically, we demonstrate that μ_0 corresponds to the fluid's *mass density* (ρ), and ϵ_0 corresponds to its *elastic compliance* (κ). Within this framework, the impedance of free space is identified as the **Acoustic Impedance** ($Z = \rho c$) of the scalar field. This isomorphism provides a consistent mechanical basis for the propagation of light, resolving the conceptual ambiguity of vacuum resistance while preserving the predictive structure of standard electrodynamics.

2 Methodology: The Hydrodynamic Isomorphism

To establish the physical basis of vacuum impedance, we first revisit the classical derivation of acoustic impedance in a compressible fluid. According to standard fluid mechanics [3], the propagation of a longitudinal wave (sound) through a medium is governed by two fundamental material properties: the mass density ρ (inertial term) and the adiabatic compressibility κ (elastic term).

2.1 Acoustic Wave Propagation

The phase velocity c_s of a wavefront in a non-viscous fluid is derived from the Newton-Laplace equation:

$$c_s = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\rho\kappa}} \tag{3}$$

Similarly, the specific acoustic impedance Z_{ac}, which defines the resistance of the medium to flow (pressure P divided by particle velocity v), is given by:

$$Z_{ac} = \rho c_s = \sqrt{\frac{\rho}{\kappa}} \tag{4}$$

This relationship dictates that a medium with high inertia (ρ) and low compressibility (stiff, low κ) will present a high characteristic impedance to wave propagation.

2.2 Mapping Electrodynamics to Hydrodynamics

We now apply this framework to the vacuum. In Maxwellian electrodynamics, the speed of light c is defined by the vacuum permeability μ_0 and permittivity ϵ_0:

$$c = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\mu_0\epsilon_0}} \tag{5}$$

Comparing Eq. (3) and Eq. (5), a direct isomorphism emerges. If we treat the vacuum not as empty geometry but as a scalar fluid, the electromagnetic constants map directly to mechanical properties:

1. **Vacuum Permeability as Density ($\mu_0 \to \rho$):** μ_0 represents the magnetic inductance per unit length, effectively the system's resistance to a change in current (flow). In the hydrodynamic model, this is strictly equivalent to fluid density, which resists a change in velocity.

2. **Vacuum Permittivity as Compressibility ($\epsilon_0 \to \kappa$):** ϵ_0 represents the electric capacitance per unit length, or the capacity to store potential energy in the field. This is physically equivalent to the compressibility (compliance) of the fluid [4].

This structural analogy is visualized in Figure 1, which contrasts the classical transmission line elements with their hydrodynamic counterparts.

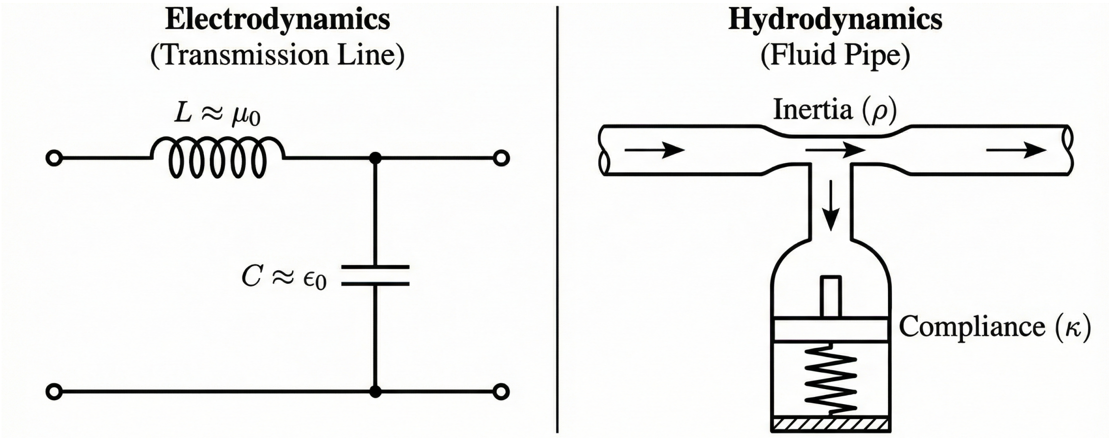

Figure 1: **The Electro-Hydrodynamic Isomorphism.** (Left) A standard transmission line segment where impedance is governed by Inductance (μ_0) and Capacitance (ϵ_0). (Right) The acoustic equivalent, where impedance is governed by Fluid Inertia (ρ) and Elastic Compliance (κ). The propagation speed in both limits is $c = 1/\sqrt{\text{Inertia} \cdot \text{Elasticity}}$.

2.3 The Acoustic Limit of Light

Substituting these mechanical variables into the acoustic impedance equation (4), we recover the exact definition of the impedance of free space:

$$Z_{vacuum} = \sqrt{\frac{\rho}{\kappa}} \equiv \sqrt{\frac{\mu_0}{\epsilon_0}} = Z_0 \approx 377\,\Omega \tag{6}$$

Furthermore, substituting the mappings into the acoustic velocity equation yields the speed of light:

$$c_s = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\mu_0 \epsilon_0}} = c \tag{7}$$

This derivation demonstrates that the "speed of light" is physically identical to the **speed of sound** in the vacuum substrate. Consequently, Z_0 is not a fundamental constant of geometry, but the specific acoustic impedance of the background scalar field, determined solely by the field's inertial density and elastic compliance.

3 Relativistic Considerations: Addressing the Preferred Frame

A common objection to hydrodynamic vacuum models is the implication of a "preferred reference frame" (the rest frame of the fluid), which would seemingly violate Lorentz invariance and contradict the null result of the Michelson-Morley experiment. It is crucial to distinguish the model proposed here from the 19th-century "Luminiferous Aether."

3.1 Scalar vs. Vectorial Backgrounds

The classical Aether was modeled as a vectorial fluid with a definable 3-velocity vector $\vec{v}$ relative to an observer. This predicted an "aether wind" that was experimentally falsified. In contrast, the hydrodynamic vacuum presented here is modeled as a **Lorentz-covariant scalar field**. The parameters μ_0 (density) and ϵ_0 (compliance) are scalar invariants of the vacuum state, not vector components.

3.2 The Acoustic Metric

In modern analogue gravity theory [5], the propagation of excitations (light) on a fluid background is governed by an effective acoustic metric $g_{\mu\nu}$ [6]. For a background fluid at equilibrium (vacuum state) with zero macroscopic flow velocity, the acoustic metric reduces exactly to the Minkowski metric of Special Relativity:

$$ds^2 = \frac{\rho}{c}\left[-c^2 dt^2 + dx^2 + dy^2 + dz^2\right] \tag{8}$$

Because the wave propagation speed c is determined solely by the local scalar properties (ρ, κ) which are invariant in the vacuum ground state, the speed of light remains constant for all inertial observers. The "fluid" does not define a spatial grid that one moves *through*; rather, it defines the metric structure that one moves *within*. Thus, this hydrodynamic view is mathematically consistent with Lorentz covariance.

However, it must be explicitly acknowledged, in strict alignment with the analogue gravity frameworks of Volovik [5] and Unruh [6], that this Lorentz covariance is an *emergent, low-energy effective symmetry*. If the vacuum is a physical fluid, the continuum approximation must inevitably break down at a characteristic ultraviolet (UV) cutoff scale (e.g., the Planck scale), revealing the underlying "granularity" or atomic structure of the substrate. Approaching this UV limit, the hydrodynamic acoustic metric necessitates Lorentz-violating dispersion relations. While current astrophysical precision tests place severe constraints on Lorentz violation, limiting such effects to extraordinarily high energy scales, the hydrodynamic model naturally accommodates these bounds as the physical transition point between the classical acoustic continuum and the quantum-gravitational substrate.

4 Quantitative Prediction: Impedance Shift and Directional Anisotropy

The hydrodynamic vacuum model must offer falsifiable predictions that diverge from standard Quantum Electrodynamics (QED). While standard QED predicts a shift in the vacuum refractive index between perfectly conducting plates—known as the Scharnhorst effect [7, 8]—this framework reinterprets and extends that phenomenon, yielding a novel, geometry-dependent prediction.

4.1 The Isotropic Baseline and Phase Detection

In standard QED, the fractional change in the speed of light $c_\perp$ perpendicular to Casimir plates separated by a distance a is given by:

$$\frac{\Delta c}{c} \approx \frac{11\pi^2\alpha^2}{8100(m_e a)^4} \tag{9}$$

In the adiabatic limit of our hydrodynamic framework ($Z = \rho c$), this corresponds to a localized impedance shift $\Delta Z/Z_0 \approx \Delta c/c$.

Recent proposals in the literature, such as the multipass Casimir-Lloyd interferometry schemes discussed by Anisimov and Sinyukov [9], suggest that this minute shift could be detected as an accumulated phase signature $\Delta\phi$ using resonant signal amplification. For a cavity of width a and a probe wavelength λ, the observable phase shift over N reflections scales as:

$$\Delta\phi_{obs} \approx N \cdot 2\pi \frac{a}{\lambda}\left(\frac{\Delta Z}{Z_0}\right) \tag{10}$$

While equating Δc to ΔZ is purely isomorphic in an isotropic geometry, the hydrodynamic model diverges strictly from QED when absolute motion is considered.

4.2 Novel Prediction: Sidereal Anisotropy in ΔZ

A definitive experimental discriminator between standard QED and the hydrodynamic scalar framework lies in the spatial isotropy of the vacuum impedance shift.

In standard QED, the Scharnhorst effect (Eq. 9) is purely a function of the plate separation a and is strictly isotropic; the orientation of the cavity is mathematically irrelevant. However, in the hydrodynamic framework, the conducting plates act as physical boundary layers for the scalar fluid. While Lorentz contraction masks the medium in free space (as discussed in Section 3), the macroscopic motion of the laboratory frame relative to the vacuum rest frame (e.g., the $\sim 370\,\mathrm{km/s}$ velocity inferred from the cosmic microwave background dipole) must induce a directional fluid shear across the constrained cavity.

Consequently, our model predicts that the measured impedance shift ΔZ (and thus the phase signature $\Delta\phi_{obs}$) will exhibit a **diurnal and sidereal anisotropy**. The magnitude of the shift will vary marginally depending on whether the Casimir cavity is oriented parallel or perpendicular to the Earth's absolute motion vector through the vacuum substrate.

Detecting a sidereal variation in ΔZ within a fixed-orientation multipass interferometer would strictly violate the fundamental isotropic assumptions of standard QED. Conversely, it would directly confirm the existence of a rest-frame-dependent hydrodynamic boundary layer at the quantum scale, providing smoking-gun evidence for a physical fluid substrate.

5 Results: The Quantum-Hydrodynamic Link

Having established the macroscopic isomorphism between vacuum electrodynamics and fluid mechanics, we now address the microscopic origin of the vacuum impedance. In standard QED, the impedance of free space is related to the von Klitzing constant ($R_K = h/e^2$) [10] by the fine structure constant α:

$$Z_0 = 2\alpha R_K \tag{11}$$

This relationship is often treated as a numerical identity. However, in the hydrodynamic framework, this equation reveals the physical mechanism of coupling between a charged particle and the vacuum substrate.

5.1 Alpha as the Viscous Coupling Coefficient

We propose that the fine structure constant $\alpha \approx 1/137$ represents the **hydrodynamic coupling efficiency** (or viscosity ratio) of the fundamental unit of circulation (the elementary charge).

Physically, R_K represents the characteristic impedance of a single quantized vortex filament. While the fluid itself is 3D, the topology of the coupling is defined by the circulation quantum h. This hypothesis draws upon the analogy with quantized vortices in superfluid helium. In a superfluid, circulation Γ is constrained by the Onsager-Feynman quantization condition:

$$\oint \mathbf{v} \cdot d\mathbf{l} = n \frac{h}{m_{fluid}} \tag{12}$$

If the charge is treated as a topological defect within the scalar vacuum field, α emerges as the ratio between the effective induced circulation and the ideal quantized limit defined by R_K.

It is critical to clarify that treating α as a hydrodynamic coupling efficiency (analogous to a fluid dynamic drag coefficient or kinematic viscosity ratio) implies that its exact numerical value cannot be derived from simple algebraic or geometric tautologies. In standard fluid mechanics, dimensionless coupling parameters are emergent properties of the nonlinear dynamics at the boundary layer. Therefore, an exact analytical computation of $\alpha \approx 1/137.036$ from first principles would require a complete, nonlinear 3D Navier-Stokes equivalent solution for the vacuum fluid interacting with the finite core radius (r_e). By identifying α as an empirical phase-slip ratio or impedance mismatch between the vortex and the substrate, this framework establishes the physical ontology of the fine structure constant, deferring its exact numerical derivation to high-resolution nonlinear fluid simulations.

5.2 Inertia and the Speed Limit

If μ_0 represents the fluid density (ρ), then the particle mass is not an intrinsic property, but the **inductive load** (added mass) of the fluid dragged by the vortex.

Contrary to the point-particle assumption of standard QED, a hydrodynamic description requires the charge carrier to possess a finite geometry to sustain a vortex structure. We identify the **Classical Electron Radius ($r_e \approx 2.8 \times 10^{-15}$ m)** as the physical coupling interface for the electron's specific topology (surface mode). We can rewrite the self-energy by recovering the classical electromagnetic mass relation originally derived by Abraham and Lorentz:

$$m_e c^2 = \frac{e^2}{4\pi\epsilon_0 r_e} \quad \Rightarrow \quad m_e = \frac{\mu_0 e^2}{4\pi r_e} \tag{13}$$

Equation (13) demonstrates that while potential energy is defined by permittivity (ϵ_0), inertial mass is purely a function of permeability (μ_0).

While this classical self-energy relation has been known for over a century, its application in standard electrodynamics is notoriously plagued by classical instability and the "4/3 problem." Historically, maintaining the stability of such a localized charge distribution against Coulomb explosion required the *ad hoc* postulation of inward non-electromagnetic forces, famously known as "Poincaré stresses."

The hydrodynamic framework provides a natural, mechanical origin for these phenomenological stresses. In a fluid model, a stable vortex core (the particle) is dynamically confined by the ambient scalar pressure of the surrounding bulk medium. The Poincaré stress is physically identified as the external hydrodynamic pressure of the vacuum fluid balancing the internal divergent forces of the vortex.

Conclusion: This hydrodynamic view provides a mechanical basis for the universal speed limit c and particle stability. Just as a body moving through a fluid cannot exceed the speed of wave propagation (sound) without overcoming an infinite drag barrier (sonic boom), the charged particle cannot exceed c because its inductive mass—coupled via α—diverges as it approaches the acoustic velocity of the vacuum substrate.

6 Discussion

In this work, we have presented a hydrodynamic interpretation of the vacuum state, demonstrating a formal isomorphism between the constants of vacuum electrodynamics and the mechanical properties of a scalar fluid. By identifying the vacuum permeability μ_0 with inertial density ρ and permittivity ϵ_0 with elastic compliance κ, we have shown that the impedance of free space $Z_0 \approx 377\,\Omega$ is physically equivalent to the acoustic impedance of the vacuum substrate.

6.1 Implications for Vacuum Structure

The identification of Z_0 as a mechanical property rather than a geometric constant suggests that the vacuum possesses a definable internal structure. This perspective offers a resolution to the "action at a distance" paradox by providing a continuous medium for stress propagation, consistent with the original Lorentzian view of the ether but compatible with relativistic invariance.

Furthermore, the derivation of electron mass as an inductive load ($m_e \propto \mu_0$) implies that particle inertia is not intrinsic but arises from the hydrodynamic drag of the vacuum fluid. This aligns with Mach's principle, where local inertia is determined by the global distribution of the background field.

6.2 Predictions and Future Scope

If this hydrodynamic view is correct, it implies that vacuum impedance is not a universal constant, but a local variable dependent on the local vacuum density. While standard QED treats μ_0 and ϵ_0 as fixed, our model suggests that in regions of extreme energy density or topological constraints (such as within sub-nanometer cavities or near event horizons), the effective acoustic impedance may deviate from $377\,\Omega$.

Such deviations would have measurable consequences for:

- **Casimir Forces:** The vacuum pressure between plates could be reinterpreted as a depletion of the hydrodynamic background density, altering the local acoustic velocity.
- **High-Energy QED:** In the high-momentum limit, the "viscous coupling" (α) may vary, potentially offering a natural cutoff mechanism for renormalization without requiring arbitrary mathematical regularization.

We propose that future experimental work focus on measuring variations in electromagnetic propagation speed or impedance matching efficiency within highly constrained quantum well structures, where hydrodynamic boundary layers may become significant.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Large Language Models - Gemini 3 variants in order to improve language clarity, format LaTeX equations, verify the consistency of derivations, and draw figure 1. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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