Optical Architectures for AI Smart Glasses: Navigating Market Inflections and Display Paradigms

Bernard Kress
Director of Optical Engineering, Android XR Team, Google LLC
1600 Amphitheatre Parkway, Mountain View, CA 94043

The global market for AI-enabled smart glasses is poised for explosive growth, shifting from niche enterprise tools to mass-market consumer accessories. This surge is fueled by advancements in multimodal AI and consumer demand for stylish, all-day wearable glasses that offer real-time assistance like visual search and live translation.

To meet these strict design and power requirements, the industry is developing advanced micro-display systems. While Laser Beam Scanners (LBS) were the first options, and RGB MicroLEDs represent the ultimate future for high brightness and miniaturization, Liquid Crystal on Silicon (LCOS) is currently proving to be a mature, cost-effective, and color-rich solution for modern consumer devices.

Connecting these displays to the user's eye requires efficient optical combiners, sparking debate among waveguide architectures. Diffractive waveguides are the industry standard but suffer from light leakage (eyeglow) and low efficiency. Holographic waveguides reduce eyeglow but face manufacturing hurdles. Meanwhile, geometric reflective waveguides—recently popularized by LCOS-driven devices like the Meta Ray-Ban Display—offer superior optical efficiency, color uniformity, and low eyeglow, but mass production and costs remain challenges. Ultimately, the successful commercialization of next-generation AI glasses will depend on seamlessly combining these display engines and waveguides to balance aesthetics, performance, and manufacturability.