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Pan Liu
Lund University
Master's programme in Water Resources Engineering - TAWRE

Popular Science Summary

When Air Gets Stuck in Water Pipes

Based on the master's thesis Air-Pocket Clearing in Downward Sloping Pressurised Pipelines

Introduction

A small pocket of air can create a large problem in a pressurised water pipe. This thesis shows how engineers can screen where air may stay trapped, and where an air valve may still be needed.

Main text

Water mains are often imagined as being completely full of water. In practice, air can enter during filling, draining, maintenance, or pressure changes. If this air is not removed, it can gather at high points, narrow the useful flow area, increase energy losses, and disturb operation.

This thesis asks a practical question: when water flows through a downward sloping pressurised pipe, will the flow carry a trapped air pocket away, or will the air stay in the pipe? The answer matters because a trapped air pocket may need to be removed by an air valve.

The study compared several ways to estimate the minimum water velocity needed to clear air pockets. This minimum velocity is called the critical velocity. The comparison included the Kalinske and Bliss criterion, a Kent-type criterion, the HR Wallingford method, and a German diagram-based guidance source.

The main result is that there is no single magic velocity. The criteria can give different answers because they describe the air-water problem in different ways. Some focus on air moved by rapidly flowing water. Others focus on the clearing of a more stationary gas pocket. Practical guidance diagrams add another interpretation. The calculated value should therefore be read as a warning range, not as a final yes-or-no answer.

The calculations also showed that pipe diameter, downward slope, and assumed air-pocket size can change the predicted clearing velocity. A valve that looks unnecessary under one criterion may still need further checking under another. This is the most useful outcome of the comparison: it shows where engineers should be cautious.

The thesis proposes a three-step screening approach. First, compare the normal operating velocity with selected critical velocities. Second, check the actual valve function, the connection to the main pipe, and the chamber condition. Third, consider larger system events, such as filling, draining, pressure-reducing valves, pump shutdowns, and other hydraulic transients.

Field observations supported this practical view. Some air valves were placed in buried chambers. Inspection depended on chamber access, manholes, removable components, and maintenance conditions. Standing water and debris can also make inspection more difficult. This means that equations alone are not enough.

Water utilities and consultants can use the framework as a first filter. It can help classify existing air-valve locations as lower risk, higher risk, or uncertain. It does not replace manufacturer data, field inspection, or transient modelling. It helps decide which sites need more attention before an air valve is removed, replaced, or left unchanged.

References

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