A crystal ball for kilonovae

1. Introduction

With the first direct detection of gravitational waves (GWs) in 2015 by the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (Advanced LIGO; Abbott et al. 2016), gravitational-wave astronomy moved from prospect to reality. The first GW source observed by Advanced LIGO, GW150914, matched the signal predicted for the merger of two black holes with masses 36 and 29 M⊙. Two years after GW15014, the Advanced LIGO and Virgo gravitational-wave observatories detected GW170817, with a waveform consistent with the merger of two neutron stars (Abbott et al. 2017c). A spatially and temporally coincident short gamma-ray burst (GRB) was also seen by the Fermi and INTEGRAL satellites (Abbott et al. 2017b). This discovery sparked a global effort to find the counterpart of GW170817 at optical wavelengths, which resulted in the identification of AT2017gfo less than 11 hours later (Abbott et al. 2017d). AT2017gfo faded exceptionally rapidly, and displayed cool temperatures and lines from unusual r-process elements at exceptionally high velocities (Smartt et al. 2017; Arcavi et al. 2017; Pian et al. 2017; Coulter et al. 2017; Kilpatrick et al. 2017). These characteristics marked AT2017gfo as a kilonova; a transient powered by the radioactive decay of short-lived nuclides formed in the merger of two neutron stars.

The detection of electromagnetic (EM) counterparts to GWs from merging neutron stars is of exceptional significance for astrophysics. Kilonovae are the predominant site for r-process nucleosynthesis, and so play a critical role in the chemical evolution of galaxies. If a kilonova can be identified and associated with a host galaxy of known redshift, then the degeneracy between inclination angle and distance inherent to a GW signal can be broken. This in turn allows the opening angle of the GRB jet to be constrained, something that has been done for a handful of GRBs to date (Jin et al. 2018). GW sources can also be used to independently determine the Hubble constant H0 (Abbott et al. 2017a).

The identification of AT2017gfo as the counterpart to GW170817 was realised by the ability of Advanced LIGO-Virgo to localise the GW signal to ∼ 30 deg2. In addition, at only 40 Mpc, GW170817 was exceptionally close. This enabled the EM counterpart to be identified through targeted observations of galaxies at this distance within the GW localisation region (Coulter et al. 2017). Unfortunately, such a strategy is only feasible for the nearest GW sources, and rapidly becomes irrealisable beyond ∼ 100 - 200 Mpc, both as the number of galaxies within the search volume increases, and as the fraction of galaxies with reliable redshifts decreases. This embarrassment of riches is a serious obstacle for identifying EM counterparts to GW transients that will be detected by Einstein Telescope in the 2030s (Abernathy et al. 2011).

Einstein Telescope (ET) will consist of three V-shaped interferometers which eliminate blind spots and further allow it to construct a null stream (Sathyaprakash et al. 2012) which can be used to veto spurious events (Wen & Schutz 2005). Additionally, ET will be a xylophone (Hild et al. 2010), i.e., a multi-band detector capable of delivering high sensitivities both at low frequencies (~ 5 Hz) and high frequencies (~ 100 Hz). Here, we focus on the C configuration (ET-C) which offers the highest low-frequency sensitivity as shown in Fig. 1. ET-C will detect ≥ O(103) binary neutron star inspirals per year out to 1 Gpc (Akcay 2018). A subset of these sources will be close enough that they will be detected a few hours before their respective mergers (Akcay 2018), hence opening up the possibility of alerting EM observatories to conduct follow-up observations before, during and after the prompt gamma-ray burst. Additionally, ET-C will yearly forecast a few tidal disruption events from NS - BH (black hole) binaries (Akcay 2018).

To fully exploit the prospect of multi-messenger astronomy, a number of wide-field survey telescopes are either operational,
2. Einstein Telescope

In this section, we compute the advance warning times \( T_{AW} \) for ET to provide (computational details are provided in Akcay 2018). Consider a binary neutron star (BNS) system with component masses \( m_1, m_2 \) inspiraling at a luminosity distance \( D \) with a corresponding redshift \( z \). For GW frequencies of interest here \( (f \lesssim 10 \text{ Hz}) \), the binary undergoes an adiabatic inspiral dominated by the emission of leading-order (quadrupole) gravitational radiation. By balancing the power emission in GWs to the rate of change of binding energy, we obtain the frequency evolution of the GW frequency

\[
f = \frac{96}{5} \frac{\rho_M^8}{r^8} \frac{(GM)}{c^5} f^{11/3},
\]

where \( \rho_M = (1 + z)(m_1 m_2)^{3/5}(m_1 + m_2)^{-1/5} \) is the redshifted chirp mass. After fixing the integration constant, Eq. (1) can be integrated to yield the time left to merger at a given frequency, usually called the inspiral time

\[
\tau_{\text{insp}}(f) = \frac{5}{256\pi} \frac{c^5}{\rho G M_l^{8/3}} f^{-8/3} = 16.72 \text{ minutes} \left( \frac{1.219 M_*}{M} \right)^{5/3} \left( \frac{10 \text{ Hz}}{f} \right)^{8/3}.
\]

This result can be supplemented with a post-Newtonian series up to \( O(c^{-2}) \) (Blanchet 2014), but the resulting expressions only change \( \tau_{\text{insp}} \) by \( \lesssim 2\% \).

A passing GW induces a response in a given interferometer (IFO) known as the GW strain. In frequency domain, the norm of the GW strain is given by \( |\mathcal{H}(f)|^2 = \frac{A h_0^2 f^{-7/6} Q}{|f f'|} \), where \( A = \pi^{2/3}/(5/24)^{2/3}, h_0 = c(1 + z)^{-3/5}M^{2/3}/D \) with \( M = GM c^{-3} \) and \( Q \) is the IFO quality factor which is a function of source sky location and inclination angles \( \theta, \phi, \iota, \psi \), and the relative detector-source polarization angle \( \psi \).

The IFO response to a GW strain is quantified in terms of a signal-to-noise ratio (SNR). As we can not a priori know the angles \( \theta, \phi, \iota, \psi \), we use an angle-RMS-averaged SNR, appropriate for a detector with triangular topology like ET

\[
\rho_{\text{ET}}(f_1f_2) = \frac{3}{5} 2 A h_0 (1 + z)^{-1/6} \int f_1 d f' f'^{-7/6} \frac{1}{S_n(f')},
\]

where \( S_n(f) \) is the amplitude spectral density of the detector (also called detector noise) and the factor of 3/5 in Eq. (3) is due to RMS-averaging (Akcay 2018). For a given source, \( \rho_{\text{ET}} \) may vary by \( \sim \pm 30\% \) compared to the average (3), but will always be \( > 0 \) because of ET's all-sky coverage.

We define \( T_{AW} \) as the time left to merger from the moment of detection defined as follows: let \( f_0 \) be the frequency at which the GW strain equals the RMS-averaged detector noise, i.e., \( \frac{5}{3} \sqrt{S_n(f_0)} = 2 \sqrt{S_n H_{\text{ET}}(f_0)} \). When \( H_{\text{ET}}(f) < h_0 f^{-7/6} \) the instant of detection is given by \( f > f_0 \) such that \( \rho_{\text{ET}}(f_0, f) = 15 \). Thus \( T_{AW} = \tau_{\text{insp}}(f) \). The total accumulated SNR is given by \( \rho_{\text{tot}} = \rho_{\text{ET}} \tilde{f}, f_0, \tilde{f} \), where \( \tilde{f} = f - f_0 \) is the frequency at which the inspiral transitions to plunge. Here, we use the standard approximation from general relativity: \( \rho_{\text{tot}} \approx c^3 \left( \frac{1}{16\pi} \frac{G M_1 + M_2}{2} \right)^{1/2} (1 + z)^{-1} \approx 157(1 + z) \left( \frac{2.8 M_0}{10^{30}} \right) \text{Hz} \text{ for } z \lesssim \frac{1}{2} \). We chose a conservative threshold SNR of 15.

\( D \) now fully determines \( T_{AW} \). In Fig. 1 we display the GW strain for four canonical \( (m_1 = m_2 = 1.4 M_\odot) \) BNS inspirals at \( D = 100, 200, 400, 600 \text{ Mpc}, \) compared to the expected ET-C sensitivity. Note that the inspiral GW strains scale as \( \sqrt{f^{-7/6}} = f^{-2/3} \) (Colpi & Sesana 2017), hence are straight lines with slope \( -2/3 \). The frequencies \( f_0 \), at which each inspiral enters ET-C's sensitivity band, are the intersection points between these straight lines and the ET-C noise and lie within \( 1 - 2 \text{ Hz} \). We list the advance warning times along with the total SNRs for these sources in Table 1 where we show that ET-C is capable of providing up to five hours of early warning before a merger.

| \( D(\text{Mpc}) \) | \( z \) | \( f(\text{Hz}) \) | \( T_{AW}(\text{hrs}) \) | \( \rho_{\text{tot}} \) | \( R(\text{yr}^{-1}) \) |
|----------------|-----|------|----------------|--------|----------|
| 100            | 0.022 | 3.3 | 5.3 | 365 | 1.54 $^{+3.20}_{-1.22}$ |
| 200            | 0.044 | 4.1 | 2.9 | 182 | 10.8 $^{+22.6}_{-8.54}$ |
| 300            | 0.065 | 4.66 | 1.9 | 121 | 29.3 $^{+60.8}_{-23.2}$ |
| 400            | 0.085 | 5.1 | 1.5 | 90.5 | 57.0 $^{+118}_{-45.1}$ |
| 500            | 0.10 | 5.4 | 1.2 | 72.2 | 93.9 $^{+195}_{-74.4}$ |
| 600            | 0.12 | 5.7 | 1.03 | 60.0 | 140 $^{+339}_{-111}$ |

2.1. Event rates for binary neutron star inspirals

We base our event rate calculations on \( R = 1540_{-1220}^{+2000} \text{ Gpc}^{-3} \text{ yr}^{-1} \) inferred from GW170817 (Abbott et al. 2017c) consistent with

Article number, page 2 of 5
110 \sim 3840 \text{ Gpc}^{-3} \text{yr}^{-1} \text{ (LIGO-Virgo Collaboration 2018)}. This translates roughly to \( R(D \leq 600 \text{ Mpc}) = 330^{+260}_{-220} \text{ yr}^{-1} \). We partition this volume into concentric shells each 100 Mpc thick. For each shell, we show the event rates in Table 1. We see from Table 1 that within \( z \lesssim 0.1 \), ET-C will annually detect GWs from \( \sim 40 \) to 600 BNS transients. Roughly 7\% of these will be within 200 Mpc yielding \( T_{\text{AW}} \gtrsim 3 \) hours which means that EM observatories will be alerted \( \sim 3 \text{ - } 40 \text{ times yearly} \) with the prospect of observing births of kilonovae. If we assume that future EM observatories could respond with \( T_{\text{AW}} = 1 \) hour warning, then all BNS transients within 600 Mpc become possible candidates for merger-kilonovae observations. In this case, early warnings would be sent by ET at least once a week and at most three times per day.

2.2. Source localisation estimations

ET will have poor source localisation because all three of its IFOs will be co-located. However, as ET-C will detect BNS transients to be localised to \( 10 \text{ deg}^2 \). In short, within 400 Mpc, we can annually expect five BNS transients to be localised to \( 10 \text{ deg}^2 \). 1.5 hours before the merger. We can expect an additional \( \sim 15 \) more with initial localisation of \( \sim 20 \text{ deg}^2 \) which we expect will be narrowed down to \( \sim 10 \text{ deg}^2 \) about one hour before the merger. We envision a three-stage localisation procedure whereby ET conducts the operations alone until \( f \sim 5 \text{ Hz} \) — roughly two hours before merger — at which point CE joins in and, finally, around \( f \sim 10 \text{ Hz} \) KAGRA+ starts accumulating SNR with \( \gtrsim 15 \) minutes left to merger.

3. Implications for optical follow-up of GW detections

Identifying an optical or near-infrared (NIR) counterpart to a GW is an observational challenge. If a GW is only localised to tens, or even hundreds of square degrees, then we must survey a large area of the sky to find an EM counterpart. While large format CCDs make taking imaging of an area of \( \sim 100 \text{ deg}^2 \) relatively straightforward, we must identify our EM counterpart of interest among the many unrelated astrophysical transients that we expect by chance within the same area. Thus far, this has relied upon large scale efforts to spectroscopically classify credible candidates that are found within the sky localisation of a GW. For example, for the BH merger GW151226, Smartt et al. (2016) found 49 candidate transients within \( 290 \text{ deg}^2 \), and obtained spectra for 20 of these. Such a survey strategy is clearly an inefficient use of scarce telescope time.

The early warning obtained for future GW events discussed in Sect. 3 offers an alternative approach for detecting EM counterparts. In brief, if we can detect a GW with \( \sim 1 \text{ hr} \) advance warning, and can localise it to \( \sim 50 \text{ deg}^2 \) or better, then we can obtain imaging of this area both immediately prior to, and after, the merger happens. Since the merger will be the only thing that has changed over such a short period of time, identifying an EM counterpart in difference imaging becomes straightforward.

While this section focuses on the optical/NIR part of the EM spectrum, we also considered the implications of an early GW warning at higher energies. Gamma-ray instruments have large field-of-views of the order of \( 1 \sim 2 \text{ sr} \) and a consequently high probability of detecting the prompt emission from the merger by chance. The detection of X-ray prompt emission (below 5 keV) could have significant scientific value, however most of the instruments sensitive at these energies have fields of view of the order of arcmin\(^2\). Currently, the JEM-X instrument onboard INTEGRAL is the only instrument with a sufficiently large field-of-view (25 deg\(^2\)). Of the missions currently under study, only THESEUS (Amati et al. 2018) would have an X-ray instrument with a large field-of-view (1 sr at 0.3 – 5 keV). However, its sensitivity (\( 10^{-10} \text{ erg cm}^{-2} \text{ s}^{-1} \) in 1000 s) will be too low to detect the prompt emission of most NS-NS or NS-BH mergers.

3.1. The rates and nature of contaminants

There are broadly three classes of contaminants that we must consider when searching for EM counterparts to GWs: stellar variables and flares such as cataclysmic variables (CV); variability in Active Galactic Nuclei (AGN); and supernovae (SNe).
The first class of contaminants show a strong dependence on Galactic latitude (Drake et al. 2014), and are concentrated in the disk of the Milky Way. In addition, for at least some CVs, a quiescent counterpart will be visible in deep images, or in other cases prior outbursts may have been detected. We hence expect that CVs and other variable stars will be a relatively minor source of contamination for EM counterpart searches. This is further borne out by Smartt et al. (2016), who found only 3 of 49 potential counterparts to GW151226 to be stellar. AGN can often be identified through their historical lightcurves, which may show previous variability, or through the presence of a cataloged X-ray or radio counterpart. Given the relatively straightforward removal of stellar and AGN contaminants, we are left with SNe as the dominant contaminant. Again, in the case of GW151226, 88% of potential counterparts turned out to be SNe. Within a magnitude limited survey around three quarters of supernovae detected will be Type Ia SNe (Li et al. 2011), due to their luminosity. So, to first order, our main source of contamination when searching for EM counterparts of GW events will be SNe Ia.

We ran Monte Carlo simulations to estimate the number of unrelated SNe Ia that may be found in a search for an EM counterpart to a GW transient. We took the volumetric SN-Ia rate from Dilday et al. (2010), and assumed that the GW event could be localised to a region of ~30 deg². We further assumed an optical survey with a cadence of 4 days and a limiting magnitude $m_r \sim 22$, and that the kilonova had an absolute magnitude of $M_r = -15$ at peak. We then calculated the number of SNe Ia that would be detected by the survey with a magnitude comparable ($\pm 1$ mag) to the kilonova, and where the SN would have not been detected on the previous image taken of the field four nights earlier. The results of this are shown in Fig. 2, where we find that for a GW source at a distance of a few hundred Mpc, we will typically have four unrelated SNe Ia that are impossible to distinguish from a kilonova solely on the basis of single filter imaging. In the worst case scenarios, we may have as many as ten contaminants that are observationally similar to the kilonova.

This calculation should be taken as an approximate guide, and the exact numbers of contaminants will vary with a number of factors. Higher-cadence transient surveys, and better localisation of GW events will reduce the number of contaminants found. On the other hand, simply increasing the depth of a survey will not necessarily improve matters; while some SNe will be detected earlier (and hence ruled out) when their lightcurves are still rising, greater numbers of more distant SNe will also be detected. In any case though, it is reasonable to expect that even in the most favourable scenarios we will always have more than a single plausible candidate counterpart to any future GWs.

### 3.2. A proposed strategy for EM counterpart detection

We have demonstrated that unrelated SNe Ia will be found within the region to which a GW is localised, and that a few of these are going to appear as new sources with comparable magnitude to a potential kilonova. There are two main reasons why this is a problem. Firstly, obtaining a spectrum of a kilonova and ~5 unrelated SNe Ia will take commensurately longer. Secondly, unrelated transients make it much harder to obtain spectra of potential BH-NS mergers, or of their very early (~1 hr) evolution. If we have five sources of comparable magnitude, and it takes ~ 1 hr to obtain a spectrum of each, we will only...
obtain a spectrum of the correct candidate in < 1 h in a minority of cases. The early warning from ET offers a solution to both of these problems. We propose that as soon as sufficient SNR is accumulated to localise a GW to ~ 20 deg^2 or better, we take a set of images for that region of the sky before the merger occurs.

The LSST can reach a 5σ limiting magnitude of r ~ 24.3 with 2×15 s images. The readout times for each exposure will be 2 s, and as the field-of-view of LSST is 9 deg^2, we will likely be able to cover the entire GW footprint in a small number of pointings. Even allowing 5 minutes for slewing of the telescope, it is likely that obtaining pre-merger images will take at most 10 minutes. After the merger, we would take a second set of images. These would be subtracted from the pre-merger template images taken ≤ 1 hr before; and the kilonova should be the only thing that has changed over this brief period, making it trivial to identify.

4. Summary

We have shown that Einstein Telescope will provide ~ hr early warning of BNS mergers, and in a substantial fraction of cases will localise these to better than 100 deg^2. This warning provides sufficient time to trigger observations of the region with wide-field optical telescopes, immediately prior to the merger. These images can then be used as templates to compare a second set of post-merger images, allowing for the rapid identification of any possible EM counterpart, without the need for costly spectroscopic screening. In addition, this technique allows for counterparts to be found faster, which may be essential to follow up the most rapidly fading sources.

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