The low density and magnetization of a massive galaxy halo exposed by a fast radio burst

J. Xavier Prochaska1,2, Jean-Pierre Macquart3, Matthew McQuinn4, Sunil Simha5, Ryan M. Shannon5, Cherie K. Day6,7, Lachlan Marnoch6,7, Stuart Ryder7, Adam Deller5, Keith W. Bannister6, Shivani Bhardwaj8, Rongrong Bordoloi9, John Bunton10, Hyerin Cho9, Chris Flynn5, Elizabeth K. Mahony6, Chris Phillips6, Hao Qiu10, Nicolas Tejos11

Present-day galaxies are surrounded by cool and enriched halo gas extending for hundreds of kiloparsecs. This halo gas is thought to be the dominant reservoir of material available to fuel future star formation, but direct constraints on its mass and physical properties have been difficult to obtain. We report the detection of a fast radio burst (FRB 181112), localized with arcsecond precision, that passes through the halo of a foreground galaxy. Analysis of the burst shows that the halo gas has low net magnetization and turbulence. Our results imply predominantly diffuse gas in massive galactic halos, even those hosting active supermassive black holes, contrary to some previous results.

The low-density gas located in the outskirts of galaxies influences the process of galaxy formation, especially gas accretion and feedback (1). Absorption-line spectroscopy can detect this nearly invisible medium. Surveys demonstrate a very high incidence of cool gas (with temperature $T \sim 10^4$ K), detected through hydrogen Lyman series and continuum absorption, surrounding galaxies with masses similar to that of our Milky Way (1, 2). Properties of this gas depend on galaxy mass but are otherwise insensitive to the galaxy’s internal properties (1, 3–5). Estimates for the total mass of the cool gas match or exceed the baryonic mass of the galaxy (4, 6). Theoretical treatments of halo gas around present-day galaxies disagree on the proportion of total mass retained in the halo during galaxy formation, with estimates ranging from several to tens of percent up to all of the baryons predicted to accrete into the halo (7, 8). This uncertainty stems from observational insensitivity to the hot ($T \gtrsim 10^6$ K) gas that pervades galactic halos (and within which the cold gas is embedded) and from systematic uncertainties in estimating its mass (1, 6). Constraints on the density and temperature of the hot gas are sufficiently limited to allow qualitatively different descriptions of its ionization and distribution (9, 10). The origin of the cool gas and its composition are challenging to explain theoretically; some models require cosmic rays and magnetic fields to transport material from the central galaxy to sustain the cool medium (11).

At coordinated universal time 17:31:15.48365 on 12 November 2018, the Commensal Real-time ASKAP Fast Transients (CRAFT) survey on the Australian Square Kilometer Array Pathfinder (ASKAP) detected a fast radio burst (FRB 181112) from the 12 antennas active at the time. The burst arrival time swept across the observing band ($\pm 1.129$ to $1.465$ GHz) (Fig. 1A), owing to propagation of the burst through a foreground plasma. The burst sweep yields an estimate of the FRB dispersion measure $DM_{\text{FRB}} = 589.27 \pm 0.03$ pc cm$^{-3}$, which is the integrated density of electrons $n_e$ at distance $r$ from Earth scaled by $(1+z)^{-1}$, with $z$ the redshift: $DM_{\text{FRB}} = n_e / (1 + z)dr$. The real-time detection triggered full download of the voltage data; these precisely localized the burst to a sky position $21^\mathrm{h}47^\mathrm{m}24.5^\mathrm{s}, 52^\circ58'58.1''$ (right ascension, declination, J2000 equinox) with a statistical (systematic) error ellipse oriented at $120^\circ$ east of north of the sky with major axis $a = 0.553'' (0.5'')$ and minor axis $b = 0.153'' (0.08'')$ (12).

Figure 1B shows a $g$-band image centered on FRB 181112, obtained with the FOcal Reducer/low dispersion Spectrograph 2 (FORS2) instrument on the Very Large Telescope (VLT). It shows the presence of a galaxy coincident with FRB 181112, previously cataloged by the Dark Energy Survey (DES) (13) as DES J214923.66–525815.28. The DES and FORS2 data also show a luminous galaxy $\approx 5''$ to the north of the FRB event (DES J214923.89–525810.43). We used follow-up spectroscopy with the FORS2 instrument to measure the redshift (12) of the former galaxy as $z = 0.760$ and that of the latter galaxy as $z = 0.376$, i.e., in the foreground. We associate FRB 181112 with DES J214923.66–525815.28 (12). Compared to the other three known host galaxies of FRBs, the host galaxy of FRB 181112 has an intermediate stellar mass of $M_* \approx 10^8$ solar masses ($M_\odot$) (fig. S3) (12). It has colors matching star-forming galaxies at $z \approx 0.4$, has an estimated star formation rate of $0.6M_\odot$ year$^{-1}$, and shows no signatures of an active galactic nucleus (AGN) (12).

The FRB sight line passes at an impact parameter $R_\perp = 29$ kpc from DES J214923.89–525810.43 (hereafter referred to as FG-181112), allowing us to probe the halo of this foreground galaxy. We analyzed the DES, FORS2, and complementary longer-wavelength Wide-field Infrared Survey Explorer (WISE) data to determine FG-181112’s physical properties (12). We derive a high–stellar mass $\log_{10}M_*/M_\odot = 10.69^{+0.23}_{-0.40}$ detection nebular emission lines indicative of an AGN and classify it as a Seyfert galaxy, and infer an old (age $\sim 1.4$ billion years) quiescent stellar population (Table 1 and table S5). Surveys of the halo gas surrounding galaxies of similar mass, with or without AGN activity (14), almost ubiquitously reveal strong absorption by cool ($T \sim 10^4$ K) gas for sight lines $R_\perp \leq 100$ kpc. Generally, the inferred total column densities of ionized gas exceed $10^{20}$ cm$^{-2}$ (4, 6), and transitions of heavy elements indicate a turbulent velocity field (15), suggesting that a fraction of the gas has a relatively high density ($n_H \sim 1$ cm$^{-3}$) (16). Such a foreground medium should influence the FRB signal.

The column of gas close to this massive galaxy, however, does not dominate $DM_{\text{FRB}}$. It contributes only $DM_{\text{FG}} \sim 50$ to $120$ pc cm$^{-3}$, depending on assumptions for the density profile and total mass of the halo gas (12). The measured $DM_{\text{FRB}}$ is consistent with models that include cosmic gas, our Galaxy, and the host (fig. S9) (17, 18). The sight line to FRB 181112 also intersects the edge of the Fermi Bubbles (12), a complex of hot gas encompassing the Galactic Center. The expected DM contribution from gas in these bubbles is small (12), but their entrained magnetic field may contribute to the FRB rotation measure (RM).

The RM is the density-weighted integral of the magnetic field parallel to the FRB sight line. The voltages recorded from the ASKAP antennas measure the electric field at the antenna locations in two orthogonal directions on the plane of the sky, enabling the linear polarization fraction of the burst radiation (and its position angle) to be measured as a function of frequency. Averaged over its duration, we find the burst to be $\sim 90\%$ linearly polarized and 10$\%$ circularly polarized (12). This can be used to estimate the burst RM,
as \( \Delta \psi \approx (c/v)^2 R \), where \( v \) is the frequency, \( c \) is the speed of light, and \( \Delta \psi_{\text{obs}} \) and \( \Delta \psi_{\text{int}} \) are the observed and intrinsic polarization angles, respectively. Figure 2 depicts the frequency sweep of the polarization angle; the apparent \( v^2 \) frequency dependence is the RM signature. We fitted an RM model to the sweep, yielding \( R = 10.9 \pm 0.9 \text{ rad m}^{-2} \).

This is a low RM value, consistent (within the uncertainty) with the estimated RM due to the halo gas of FG-181112: \( R = 10.9 \text{ rad m}^{-2} \). This is also within the correlation limits of near-equipartition gas (\( 3 \text{ cm}^{-3}/C_0 \approx 1 \)), in which cosmic ray pressure transports cool accreting gas into cooler clouds (\( 23 \)). Near-equipartition field strengths are generated in some models in which cosmic ray pressure transports cool gas and metals to large distances from galaxies (\( 20, 21 \)). Our limit on \( B_{\parallel}^{\text{max}} \) is below the mean parallel field strength for physically motivated \( n_e, \Delta L, \) and \( T \) (\( 19 \)).

The halo gas of FG-181112 broadens the width of the pulse at any given frequency. This temporal broadening \( \tau_{\text{scatt}} \) arises from density fluctuations within the medium, which impose small differences in light-travel time for rays propagating through the gas (\( 17, 23 \)). This scattering is geometrical, and its effects are maximal for a scattering “screen” located at half the distance to the FRB. We determine an upper limit of \( \tau_{\text{scatt}} < 40 \mu s \) due to scattering, constraining both the turbulent properties of the halo gas and its density. A 3-ms-wide pulse, 150 times the width of the FRB pulse, would still have been detected—i.e., the very narrow width of the FRB 181112 pulse is not the result of observational bias. Figure 2B shows that the temporal profile of FRB 181112 consists of two pulses separated by \( \sim 800 \mu s \). The broadening limit is derived by modeling each component as a symmetric intrinsic pulse convolved with the one-sided exponential decay expected as a result of scattering (\( 17 \)). Temporal smearing due to inhomogeneities in the plasma distribution along...
the line of sight would otherwise broaden the pulse to a frequency-dependent duration $\tau_{\text{scatt}}(v) = \tau_0(v/1 \text{ GHz})^\gamma$, where the index $\gamma$ is typically $\approx -4$ (12).

The observed $\tau_{\text{scatt}}$ constrains the integral of the square of the density along the sight line, $\langle n_e^2 \rangle_c = \langle n_e^2 \rangle / \int d\Delta L$, which takes the halo of FG-181112 to have characteristic length $\Delta L$ with an average density of $\langle n_e \rangle$. Thus, the parameter $\alpha$ encapsulates the root mean square amplitude of density fluctuations and the volume filling fraction of the turbulence, $f_v$. The limit on the in situ density assuming a Kolmogorov spectrum of turbulence (12) is

$$\langle n_e \rangle < 2 \times 10^{-3} \alpha^{-1} \left(\frac{\Delta L}{50 \text{ kpc}}\right)^{-1/2} \times \left(\frac{L_0}{1 \text{ kpc}}\right)^{1/3} \left(\frac{\tau_{\text{scatt}}}{40 \mu\text{s}}\right)^{5/12} \text{cm}^{-3} \quad (1)$$

where $\Delta L \sim 50 \text{ kpc}$ approximates the path length through the foreground halo and $L_0$ is the outer scale of turbulence. As the turbulence is likely to be produced by galactic winds and inflows, we expect it to be driven at scales smaller than the impact parameter ($\sim 30 \text{ kpc}$) and consider $L_0 = 1 \text{ kpc}$ a reasonable value.

We now examine two standard models for halo gas in which the medium is composed of either hot ($T \sim 10^6 \text{ K}$) virialized gas or cool gas pressure-confined by the hot gas. In the case of hot virialized gas, our constraint on $\langle n_e \rangle$ suggests densities lower than those expected of $\sim 10^{-3} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ gas with kiloparsec driving scales (fig. S12). Because we expect the volume filling fraction of this gas to be near unity, the upper limit on the density can be ameliorated only if the gas is much less turbulent (i.e., $\alpha < 1$) relative to galactic astrophysical plasmas, especially the interstellar medium of our Galaxy, where $\alpha \sim 7$ (12, 24).

For turbulent, cool $10^4 \text{ K}$ clouds embedded in a hot medium, the constraints are stronger. Assuming pressure equilibrium with characteristic values for the hot gas $n_h = 10^{-3} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ and $T = 2 \times 10^6 \text{ K}$, application of Eq. 1 with $L_0 = 1 \text{ kpc}$ and $\Delta L = 50 \text{ kpc}$ yields $\alpha < 0.01$. Because $\alpha \approx f_v^{-2/3}$, we require a filling factor of cool clouds of $f_v < 10^{-4}$ if the clouds are fully turbulent. Even lower values are required to satisfy this condition if the driving for turbulence within cool clouds is instead at parsec scales, which may be physically motivated (25).

These limits on the halo gas density derived from the scattering analysis contradict prior inferences that cool halo gas has a volume filling fraction of $f_v \sim 10^{-4}$ to $10^{-2}$ (6, 26, 27). The total neutral hydrogen column density offers the most direct comparison to our result: Photon ionization equilibrium constrains the same combination of parameters as scattering, implying

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**Fig. 3. Constraints on the coherent magnetic field parallel to the line of sight $B_{||}$ and electron density $n_e$ in the halo of FG-181112.** The hatched regions show the parameter space in $B_{||}$, $n_e$ (cool gas) ruled out for the halo of FG-181112 from the measured RM and $\tau_{\text{scatt}}$ of FRB 181112. These constraints are largely independent of the properties of the foreground galaxy. We compare these results with previous inferences for the density of cool halo gas (colored regions), based on ionization modeling and Ly$\alpha$ fluorescence. We also illustrate previous estimations for the magnetic field strength in halo gas (yellow line) (22), which conflict with our results.

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**Table 1. Properties of FRB 181112, its host, and the foreground galaxy FG-181112.** The two uncertainties in right ascension and declination are statistical and systematic, projected onto the coordinate axes. These uncertainties are best described as ellipses with position angle $120^\circ$ east of north and major and minor axes of $\sigma_{\text{statistical}} = 0.55''$, $\sigma_{\text{systematic}} = 0.15''$ and $\sigma_{\text{systematic}} = 3.2''$. The coherent magnetic field, density, and filling factor estimates assume a characteristic path length through the halo of $\Delta L = 50 \text{ kpc}$. The density and filling factor estimates assume a driving scale with root mean square fluctuations of 1 at $L_0 = 1 \text{ kpc}$, with the bound scaling as $\propto L_0^{1/2}$, as well as a Kolmogorov spectrum of turbulence to separations below the diffractive scale $\tau_{\text{scatt}}$. The filling factor estimate further assumes that cool $T_{\text{cool}} = 10^4 \text{ K}$ gas is in pressure equilibrium with hot gas with density $\langle n_e \rangle = 10^{-3} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ and temperature $T_{\text{hot}} = 2 \times 10^6 \text{ K}$ hot gas, with the bound scaling as $\propto \langle n_e \rangle T_{\text{hot}}/T_{\text{cool}}^{-2}$. See text and (12) for details.

| Property | Value |
|----------|-------|
| Right ascension ($J2000$) | $327.34846^\circ \pm 0.00007^\circ \pm 0.0006^\circ$ |
| Declination ($J2000$) | $-52.97093^\circ \pm 0.0004^\circ \pm 0.0002^\circ$ |
| Dispersion measure ($DM_{\text{tot}}$) | $589.27^\circ \pm 0.03 \text{ pc cm}^{-3}$ |
| Rotation measure (RM) | $10.9^\circ \pm 0.9 \text{ rad m}^{-2}$ |
| Pulse width | $<40 \mu\text{s}$ |

**Host galaxy**

- Redshift: $0.47550 \pm 0.00015$
- Stellar mass: $2.6 \pm 1.1 \times 10^9 M_\odot$
- Star formation rate: $0.6 M_\odot \text{ year}^{-1}$

**Foreground galaxy FG-181112**

- Redshift: $0.36738 \pm 0.00007$
- Impact parameter to the FRB sight line ($R_L$) | $29 \pm 3 \text{ kpc}$ |
- Stellar mass | $4.9 \pm 3.2 \times 10^9 M_\odot$
- Star formation rate | $\leq 0.3 M_\odot \text{ year}^{-1}$ |
- Coherent magnetic field parallel to the line of sight | $B_{||} < 0.5 \mu\text{G}(n_e/10^2 \text{ cm}^{-3})$ |
- Density constraint for hot, diffuse gas ($T_{\text{v}} - 1$) | $n_e < 2 \times 10^{-3} \text{ cm}^{-3}$ |
- Filling factor constraint for cool, clumpy gas | $f_v < 10^{-4}$ |
(n_e/0.1 cm⁻³)(f_V/10⁻³)¹/₂(ΔL/50 kpc)¹/₂ ~ 1 if we take a typical neutral hydrogen column density of 10¹⁸ cm⁻² at 30 kpc measured for halos with similar masses as FG-181112 (4). Reconciling these values with the scattering from FG-181112 either implies that the cool clouds are less turbulent than assumed or that our sight line has less cool gas than is typical. The foreground galaxy is classified as a Seyfert, with an embedded accreting supermassive black hole in a central AGN that could lead to a more evacuated halo (28), although it has been argued that such activity may lead to more cool gas (29). Even if the clouds are not turbulent and instead we consider the refractive bending of light through a network of parsec-scale clouds (25), we rule out a population of 0.1-pc (or smaller) clouds with f_V ~ 10⁻³ (22).

FRBs experience a number of propagation effects that render them sensitive probes of the density, magnetic field, and turbulence of the otherwise elusive gas that pervades galaxy halos. The constraints derived from FRB 181112 for the halo of a massive galaxy are summarized in Fig. 3. The n_e · B₁ parameter space ruled out by our observations conflicts with several previous inferences for halo gas (22, 26, 27). Our observations indicate a density of hot gas that is lower than in many models and also a column of cool gas that is smaller than commonly inferred.

Our results demonstrate that FRBs can be used to elucidate the physical properties of diffuse gas in the halos of galaxies. The multiple pulses observed in FRB 181112 could be due to multipath propagation through the gas. That would be a natural consequence of a medium comprising very low filling factor cool clouds embedded in hot virialized halo gas, with the pulse multiplicity signifying the number of clouds intersected and their arrival times yielding their offsets from the direct burst sight line.

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Data and materials availability: This work is based on observations collected at the European Southern Observatory, available from http://archive.eso.org/ under program ID 0102.A-0450(A) (PI: Macquart); before the ESO proprietary period expires, they can be obtained at https://drive.google.com/drive/trelders/15QrdfZqJbNAnj-mGd0H9XsVSLb9i12s. Observations from the Australia Telescope Compact Array are available at the CSIRO Data Access Access Portal (30). Additional datasets used in this paper are available from the gSTAR Data Management and Collaboration Platform (gDMCP) at https://data-portal.hpc.swin.edu.au/ dataset/askap-visuals-ands-images-for-frb181112, including the nine ASKAP visibility datasets used to calibrate and determine the localization of FRB 181112, radio images of the FRB and surrounding field, and the ATCA images used for astrometric alignment. Reduced data and scripts are available at Zenodo (31). Data reduction scripts and code written by the coauthors for this project are available from the craf git repository https://bitbucket.org/csiro/craf/craft.git, the pyVLBI repository https://github.com/dngwin/pyvlbibreduce, the FRB repository https://github.com/FRBs/FRB, and the pyVLBI repository https://github.com/jypelt/pyvlbi.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS
science.sciencemag.org/content/366/6462/231/suppl/DC1 Materials and Methods. Supplementary Text Figs. S1 to S12 Tables S1 to S7 References (26–80)
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