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Practical Range Sensing with Thermal Light

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Many quantum sensing suggestions rely on temporal correlations found in photon pairs generated by parametric down-conversion. In this work, we show that the temporal correlations in light with a thermal photon statistics can be equally useful for such applications. Using a subthreshold laser diode as an ultrabright source of thermal light, we demonstrate optical range finding to a distance of up to 1.8 km.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Quantum sensing uses quantum phenomena to improve the measurements of physical parameters and can be implemented in photonic, atomic, or solid-state systems [1]. Photonic quantum sensing techniques include ghost imaging and superresolution imaging [2]. Many photonic quantum sensing schemes rely on photon pairs generated in spontaneous parametric down-conversion (SPDC) [3] that can be entangled in several degrees of freedom, but most often make use of the temporal correlation between the photons [4]. Examples are range finding [5], illumination [6], and clock synchronization [7] schemes, where quantum light sources have an advantage of being stationary, and therefore carrying no obvious timing structure that may be subject to manipulation or eavesdropping. Furthermore, sensing schemes with modulated light sources may be susceptible to optical crosstalk [8], while sensing based on time-correlated light from nonmodulated sources cannot be reproduced.

In this work, we consider thermal light an alternative resource of time-correlated photons by utilizing its photon bunching property. This bunching behavior has been used to determine the length of optical fibers by time-delay measurements [9]. We demonstrate range sensing using a relatively simple thermal light source based on a subthreshold diode laser. The resulting spectral density of this source exceeds that of SPDC sources by approximately 10 orders of magnitude. As the luminosity of SPDC-based photon-pair sources is typically limited to nanowatts, such thermal light sources can substantially increase the signal in range-sensing applications where temporal correlations in nonmodulated light sources are used.

II. TIME-CORRELATED PHOTON PAIRS

Photonic sensing applications often make use of modulated light sources and seek for correlations of a returned signal with the modulation. In an attempt of moving to low light levels, one can make use of inherent temporal correlations found in photon pairs emerging from SPDC in three- or four-wave mixing processes. These processes generate pairs of photons that exhibit a strongly peaked second-order correlation function $g^{(2)}(\tau) = f(\tau/\tau_c)$, which characterizes a probability to observe a pair at a time separation τ . The function f is strongly peaked around $\tau = 0$ (with a spread on the order of a coherence time τ_c), and can be observed in specialized quantum light sources. Sensing applications based on this effect are carried out by measuring detection time differences between one photon acting as a reference, and the other one acting as a probe.

A more natural type of light is thermal light. Thermal light, such as blackbody radiation, exhibits a characteristic temporal photon bunching behavior [10], also known as the Hanbury Brown-Twiss effect [11]. This can also be described by a peaked second-order timing correlation,

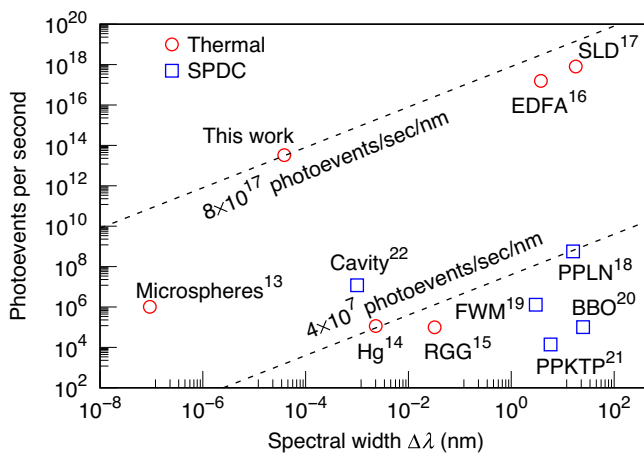
$$g^{(2)}(\tau) = 1 + e^{-2|\tau|/\tau_c}, \quad (1)$$

where τ is again the timing separation of the two photodetection events, and τ_c is the coherence timescale of the temporal photon bunching where thermal photons have a tendency to be detected closer together than described by Poissonian statistical timing distribution. Similar to light generated by SPDC, the coherence timescale τ_c is inversely proportional to the spectral width $\Delta f \approx c\Delta\lambda/\lambda^2$ of the thermal light, which is given by the Fourier transform of the source power spectrum [12], such that $\Delta f = 1/\tau_c$ for single-line Gaussian spectrum. Here, λ is the central wavelength of the light, $\Delta\lambda$ the wavelength spread, and c the speed of light.

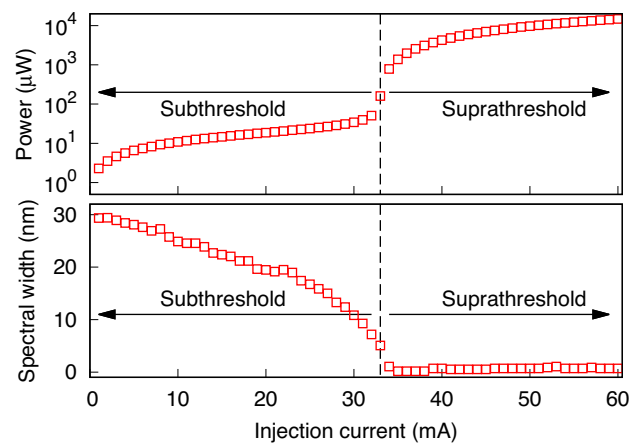
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78 A relevant practical consideration for sensing applica-
 79 tions is the brightness of the correlated light source. As
 80 shown in Fig. 1, SPDC light sources generate an out-
 81 put power below a nanowatt, or in the range of 10^4 to
 82 10^9 photoevents per second. This limits the practicality
 83 of SPDC light-based sensing in environments with high
 84 attenuation or return loss. Another useful property in a tem-
 85 poral correlation measurement is the accuracy that can be
 86 practically used to infer, e.g., a time of flight for one of
 87 the photons. Timing uncertainties of semiconductor-based
 88 single-photon detectors are somewhere below a nanosec-
 89 ond, but more recent nanowire-based detectors may reach
 90 a few picoseconds. When identifying the temporal correla-
 91 tion feature in thermal light, however, it is necessary that
 92 the correlation peak is still detectable. If the coherence
 93 time of the thermal light is significantly smaller than the
 94 detector timing uncertainty, the visibility of the temporal
 95 correlation washes out and may make it impossible to iden-
 96 tify it on top of the Poissonian background. It is therefore
 97 desirable to use thermal light sources with a spectral width
 98 below approximately equal to 1 GHz.

99 Thermal light with such a narrow optical bandwidth has
 100 been generated in many different ways. Early examples
 101 include single emission lines of gas discharge lamps [11].
 102 Other methods involve transmitting laser light through ran-
 103 dom dispersion media such as suspension of microspheres
 104 [13], or a rotating ground glass plate [15]. These sources,
 105 however, have either relatively low output power due to
 106 the spatial incoherence of the randomization mechanism,
 107 or (e.g., in the case of rotating ground glass modulators) a
 108 relatively long coherence time.



F1:1 FIG. 1. Spectral densities of thermal and SPDC light sources
 F1:2 based on the following: microspheres [13], suspension of micro-
 F1:3 spheres; Hg [11,14], mercury discharge lamp; RGG [9,15], rotat-
 F1:4 ing ground glass; EDFA [16], erbium-doped fiber amplifier; SLD
 F1:5 [17], superluminescent diode; PPLN [18], periodically poled
 F1:6 lithium niobate; FWM [19], four-wave mixing; BBO [20], beta-
 F1:7 barium borate; PPKTP [21], periodically poled potassium titanyl
 F1:8 phosphate; cavity [22], enhancement by microring resonator.



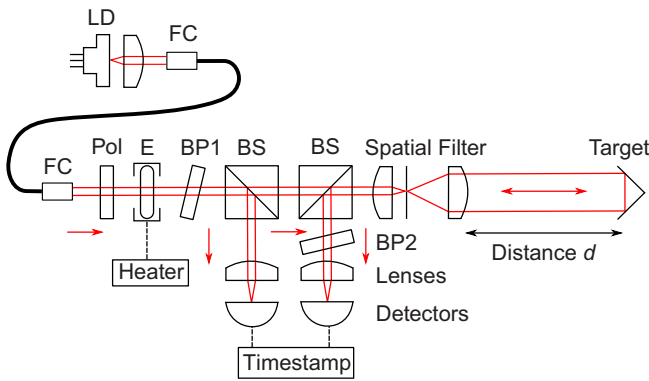
F2:1 FIG. 2. Output power and spectral width $\Delta\lambda$ of a laser diode
 F2:2 as a function of its injection current to determine the lasing
 F2:3 threshold.

109 Here, we use a laser diode operating below the lasing
 110 threshold [23,24] to generate thermal light [25,26]. This
 111 amplified spontaneous emission process generates signifi-
 112 cantly higher output power in the range of 10 μ W to 100
 113 mW. Light sources of a similar category include superlumi-
 114 nescent diodes, and erbium-doped fiber amplifiers. These
 115 examples tend to have spectral densities above milliwatts
 116 per nanometer.

117 The diode laser we use (nominal lasing wavelength
 118 $\lambda = 518$ nm, single spatial mode output) shows a lasing
 119 threshold current around 33 mA (see Fig. 2), where the
 120 output power exhibits a sharp increase of 3 orders of mag-
 121 nitude, and the spectrum narrows to a single emission line,
 122 limited by the grating spectrometer to about 0.3 nm. We
 123 operate the diode laser at a subthreshold current of 32.9
 124 mA, where it exhibits the photon bunching behavior that
 125 is characteristic of thermal light. The light is then cou-
 126 pled into a single spatial mode optical fiber. We observe
 127 an optical power of 12.5 μ W, corresponding to a pho-
 128 ton rate $R \approx 3.3 \times 10^{13} \text{ s}^{-1}$, within a spectral window
 129 of $\Delta f = 43$ MHz. This results in a thermal light source
 130 of extremely high spectral brightness of about 8×10^{17}
 131 photoevents per second and nanometer.

F3:1 III. RANGE-SENSING SETUP

132 The stationary thermal light generated from a subthresh-
 133 old laser diode is implemented into an optical ranging
 134 setup based on time-of-flight measurements, commonly
 135 known as light distance and ranging (lidar) (see Fig. 3).
 136 While conventional lidar introduces timing modulation
 137 [8,27] into the intensity, amplitude, or phase of the light
 138 source, to provide timing correlations, this work relies on
 139 photon bunching of thermal light to provide the timing
 140 correlations. We do record the photodetection events with
 141



F3:1 FIG. 3. Experimental setup using thermal light for ranging
 F3:2 measurements. LD, laser diode; FC, fiber coupler; Pol, polarizer;
 F3:3 E, etalon; BP1, BP2, bandpass filters; BS, beam splitter.

a high timing resolution to obtain the temporal photon bunching signature $g^{(2)}(\tau)$ similar to Ref. [28].

To ensure that we select only a single chip mode of thermal light from the subthreshold laser diode, a combination of a polarization filter, a bandpass filter (BP1 in Fig. 3) and a temperature-tuned etalon is used. The etalon is based on a fused silica (Suprasil311) substrate and has a tuning parameter of 4 GHz/K for its resonances. Optical coatings with a reflectivity of 97% on both sides result in a finesse of 103. The plano-parallel substrate has a thickness of 0.5 mm, resulting in a free spectral range of about 205 GHz, and spectral transmission windows of 2 GHz FWHM [29]. This allows effective suppression of adjacent laser-diode chip modes, which are separated by about 50 GHz from the mode used. The bandpass interference filter BP1 has a 2-nm-wide passband centered at $\lambda = 518$ nm to suppress source light beyond the free spectral range of the etalon.

An asymmetric beam splitter directs 92% of the filtered thermal light into the probe beam and retains 4% as a local reference beam sent to a first single-photon detector.

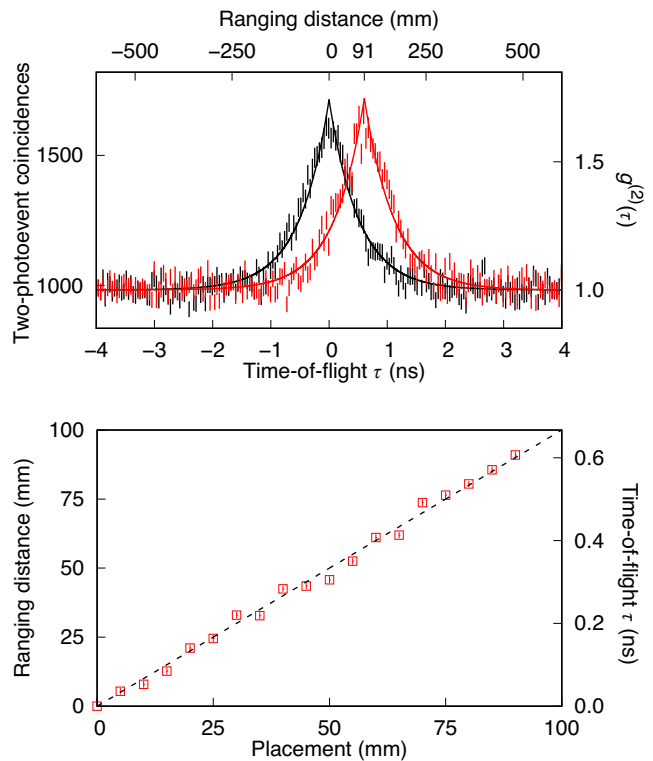
The spectrally filtered thermal light beam passes through a 50:50 beam splitter and a telescope formed by a lens pair ($f = 50$ mm, $f = 300$ mm) around a spatial filter, and is expanded to a diameter of about 50 mm. The probe beam returns from the target reflector through the same telescope and beam splitter onto the probe photodetector. The spatial filter cleans up the returning probe beam and reduces ambient light contribution from reaching the detectors, and the use of a second beam splitter ensures that no breakdown flash light from the target detector can reach the reference photodetector. A second bandpass filter BP2 is used to suppress ambient light reaching the probe detector.

The $g^{(2)}(\tau)$ photon bunching peak is shifted by a time $\tau_0 = 2d/c$ in its timing position, corresponding to the optical path-length difference between probe and reference beam, thus allowing the distance d of a target retroreflector to be inferred from the peak position of $g^{(2)}(\tau)$.

Both single-photon detectors are actively quenched silicon avalanche photodiodes with a quantum efficiency about 50% at 550 nm, and a timing jitter around 40 ps. The detected photoevents are timestamped by an oscilloscope with (sampling rate 40 GSPS), and time differences were histogrammed into 40-ps-wide time bins for short distances d , or recorded with an FPGA-based timestamp device with a resolution of 2 ns and sorted into 2-ns-wide time bins numerically for long distances d .

IV. RANGE-SENSING DEMONSTRATIONS

Figure 4 shows two representative time-difference histograms together with a fitted second-order timing correlation function $g^{(2)}(\tau)$ according to Eq. (1). These allow determination of the positions τ_0 of their respective bunching peaks and the corresponding ranging distances d from the round-trip time of the probe beam for a set of target placement positions (Fig. 4, bottom trace). The resulting ranges are in good agreement with their corresponding target placement positions, and compatible with a constraint in the detector timing jitter (about 40 ps FWHM).



F4:1 FIG. 4. Top: photon bunching $g^{(2)}(\tau)$ measurements with the
 F4:2 target reflector placed at 0 (black) and 90 mm (red). The solid
 F4:3 line represents a fit to Eq. (1) resulting in $\tau_c = 1.03 \pm 0.03$ ns,
 F4:4 a peak displacement of $\tau_0 = 0.606 \pm 0.008$ ns corresponding to a
 F4:5 ranging distance of $d = 91.0 \pm 1.2$ mm, with a reduced χ^2 of
 F4:6 1.19. Bottom: ranging distances extracted from fits to the bunching
 F4:7 signatures as a function of the placement positions to test for
 F4:8 distance resolution.

199 To demonstrate the robustness of the ranging setup,
 200 we conducted two outdoor field measurements. Figure 5
 201 shows two long-range time-of-flight measurements
 202 together with a reference zero position (black trace), result-
 203 ing in the ranging distances of 965.29 ± 0.02 m (blue) and
 204 $1,851.48 \pm 0.02$ m (red) fitted to Eq. (1) with reduced χ^2
 205 of 1.09 and 1.05, respectively, under the assumption of a
 206 unit refractive index of air. The increased uncertainty compared to the short-range measurements shown in Fig. 4 are
 207 due to the more coarse histogramming for this experiment.
 208

209 For the long-distance measurements, the etalon temper-
 210 ature tuning and stability was improved relative to
 211 the measurements in Fig. 4, increasing the coherence
 212 timescale $\tau_c = 23.2 \pm 0.4$ ns (red), corresponding to a
 213 spectral linewidth $\Delta f = 43$ MHz.

214 The temporal photon bunching peak (red) is slightly
 215 reduced to $g^{(2)}(\tau = 0) = 1.591 \pm 0.009$ (red) due to an
 216 increase of the bin width from 40 ps to 2 ns for the time
 217 differences, and by noise contribution from ambient light
 218 to the probe detector.

219 The detection rate at the probe detector was fluctu-
 220 ating around 10^5 s⁻¹. With the emission rate of

$R \approx 3.3 \times 10^{13}$ s⁻¹, this corresponds to a return loss of 80
 221 to 90 dB in that experiment. 222

V. SIGNAL-TO-NOISE CONSIDERATIONS 223

224 The very high spectral density of our light source helps
 225 to increase the signal-to-noise ratio [30,31] of a bunching
 226 peak detection significantly. When photodetectors are fast
 227 enough to resolve the temporal coherence τ_c of the photon
 228 bunching signature, the SNR of the second-order correla-
 229 tion function $g^{(2)}(\tau)$ will be dominated by shot noise of the
 230 photodetection events, and can be described by

$$\text{SNR} = r \times V^2 \sqrt{\tau_c \cdot \Delta T}, \quad (2) \quad 231$$

232 with the photoevent rate r , the interferometric visibility
 233 $V = \sqrt{g^{(2)}(0) - 1}$, the coherence time τ_c , and the integra-
 234 tion time ΔT .

235 With a photon bunching peak value $V^2 = 0.6$ and a
 236 coherence timescale $\tau_c = 23$ ns, which corresponds to the
 237 measured values in Fig. 5, an upper bound for the signal-
 238 to-noise ratio of around 30 can already be achieved after
 239 an integration time $\Delta T = 1$ ms at a photodetection rate
 240 of $r = 10^7$ s⁻¹ given by typical avalanche photodetector
 241 saturation. This high tolerance to attenuation provides the
 242 thermal light source an advantage over SPDC light sources
 243 in practical sensing use cases where significant losses can
 244 be expected.

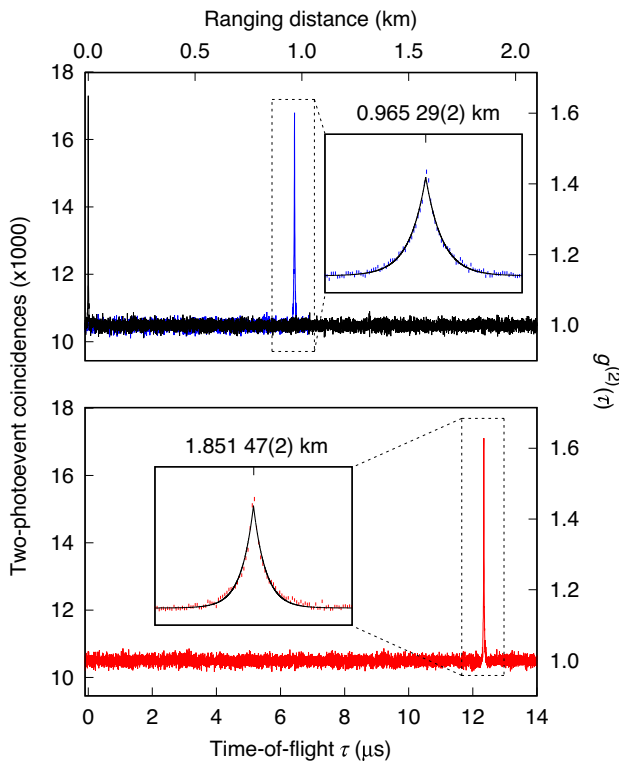
VI. SUMMARY 245

246 This work explored the use of thermal light for appli-
 247 cations where measurements (like range finding) are based
 248 on detecting correlations in time. Subthreshold lasers with
 249 their intrinsic temporal correlations thus provide a pow-
 250 erful alternative to light sources based on spontaneous
 251 parametric down-conversion in quantum sensing applica-
 252 tions, and may offer superior signal-to-noise ratios at a
 253 much reduced system complexity.

254 With such light sources, a technique originally used for
 255 estimating the size of stars half a century ago can boost a
 256 wide range of practical quantum sensing applications that
 257 mostly rely on temporal correlations.

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F5:1 FIG. 5. Optical ranging measurements to the reference zero
 F5:2 distance position with the retroreflector placed at the telescope
 F5:3 aperture (top, black trace), and the signal obtained with a
 F5:4 retroreflector about 1-km away (top, blue trace). The bottom
 F5:5 trace shows the bunching signature with the target retroreflector
 F5:6 located about 1.8 km away from the reference detector.

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