

Low timing jitter detector for gigahertz quantum key distribution

R.J. Collins, R.H. Hadfield, V. Fernandez, S.W. Nam and G.S. Buller

A superconducting single-photon detector based on a niobium nitride nanowire is demonstrated in an optical-fibre-based quantum key distribution test bed operating at a clock rate of 3.3 GHz and a transmission wavelength of 850 nm. The low jitter of the detector leads to significant reduction in estimated quantum bit error rate and a resultant improvement in secrecy efficiency compared to previous estimates made by use of silicon single-photon avalanche detectors.

Introduction: Quantum key distribution (QKD) [1–3] offers a verifiably secure method to share cryptographic keys between two remote parties (Alice and Bob). QKD allows Alice and Bob to detect the presence of an eavesdropper (Eve) and to agree upon a secure encryption key for communication by encoding information on the states of individual photons. We have previously constructed a QKD test bed based on the B92 protocol [2] using highly attenuated pulses from vertical cavity surface emitting lasers (VCSELs) operating at a wavelength of 850 nm in conjunction with a quantum transmission channel composed of standard telecommunications optical fibre (singlemode at wavelengths of 1300/1550 nm) [4–6]. In standard telecommunications optical fibre, the 850 nm wavelength light propagates as two modes (LP₀₁ and LP₁₁), and due to mode dispersion these two modes travel at different velocities, causing a spreading of the optical pulses that can lead to increase in the quantum bit error rate (QBER). In our test bed, the second-order mode is suppressed by utilising mode control methods, allowing us to achieve clock rates of up to 3 GHz using silicon single photon avalanche diodes (Si SPADs) [6, 7]. In this Letter we present estimates of QBER for a QKD test bed operating at a frequency of 3.3 GHz and using low-jitter superconducting single-photon detectors (SSPDs) based on niobium nitride nanowires [8, 9].

The SSPDs used in this work were 100 nm-wide niobium nitride meander wires, covering a 10 × 10 μm area with a fill factor of 50 %. Each superconducting wire was biased close to its critical current; when a photon strikes the wire a resistive hotspot is formed, triggering a measurable voltage pulse. The SSPD detectors were fibre-coupled with singlemode telecom fibre, packaged and installed in a cryogen-free refrigerator system, with an operating temperature of 3 K [10]. These detectors offer low jitter (68 ps full width at half maximum (FWHM)) [11] and fast recovery times (below 10 ns), making them highly promising candidates for QKD at gigahertz clock rates.

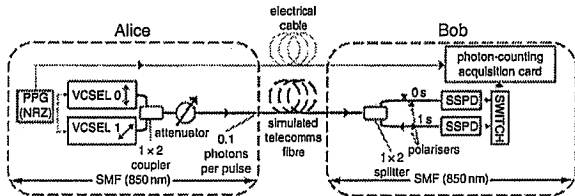


Fig. 1 Quantum key distribution test bed used to measure performance of superconducting single photon detector

Initial data-stream to drive high-speed vertical cavity surface emitting lasers (VCSELs) was a non-return-to-zero signal from a pulse pattern generator (PPG). Telecommunications fibre quantum channel simulated using additional attenuation in Alice

Experimental test bed: Fig. 1 shows a schematic of the QKD test bed. The layout is described in detail in [4–6]. The mean photon number per pulse leaving Alice (μ) is $0.1 \pm 6 \times 10^{-3}$. Different quantum channel transmission distances are simulated with a programmable digital attenuator. At 850 nm an attenuation of 2.2 dB corresponds to a distance of 1 km in fibre. In this demonstration we used a pair of SSPDs in place of Si SPADs. Amplified voltage pulses from each SSPD were recorded separately by a time-correlated single-photon counting (TCSPC) card [12] in a desktop PC operated in histogram mode.

The QBER in a QKD system is defined as the ratio of error bits to the total number of bits received. In QKD, all errors are attributed to the

presence of an eavesdropper (Eve). With rising QBER an increasing proportion of received bits must be expended in privacy amplification to minimise Eve's share of the information. In our B92 QKD scheme the distillation efficiency of secret key (the ratio of the final secure bit rate to the raw detector events) is given by [13]:

$$\text{Secrecy Efficiency} \approx [1 + Q \log_2(Q) - 3.5Q - I_{AE} (1 - (1 - Q) \log_2(1 - Q) - 3.5Q)] \quad (1)$$

where Q is the QBER and $I_{AE} = 0.29$ the maximum information shared between Alice and Eve for the B92 protocol [14]. Although the B92 protocol is inherently more susceptible to the 'intercept and resend' attack with a lossless channel, it was chosen for experimental simplicity. This test bed was used to characterise optical components such as detectors in order to assess their suitability in future implementations of more secure QKD protocols.

In the context of high bit rate polarisation-encoding QKD there are usually three contributions to the QBER:

$$QBER = QBER_{Opt} + QBER_{Det} + QBER_{Int} \quad (2)$$

The first term, $QBER_{Opt}$, is due to the polarisation extinction ratio resulting mainly from passive optical components within the optical system. This is a measure of the optical quality of the setup and is independent of transmission distance. The second term, $QBER_{Det}$, arises from the detector dark counts. At high link loss, the number of received bits falls and the contribution of dark counts to the QBER increases. The third term is the intersymbol interference, where errors are caused by counts from a given clock period that leak into the adjacent period due to source jitter, detector jitter, and dispersion in the transmission medium. This term usually sets the minimum QBER in high clock rate QKD using SPADs with ~400 ps FWHM jitter [5]. In this demonstration we are able to reduce this source of error by employing a detector with significantly lower jitter (SSPD, 68 ps FWHM).

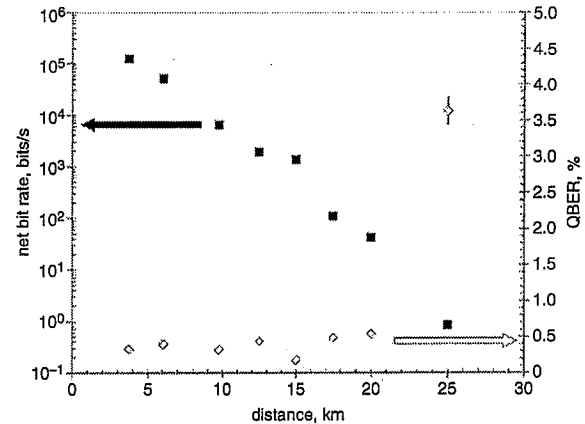


Fig. 2 Quantum bit error rate (QBER) and net bit rate (NBR, secret key transmission rate) for quantum key distribution test bed using superconducting single photon detector

◇ QBER measured by superconducting single photon detector
 ■ NBR measured by superconducting single photon detector

Results: Fig. 2 shows the QBER and net bit rate (NBR – the projected distillation rate of secret key, given by multiplying (1) by the raw event rate at the detectors) for the test bed at a clock rate of 3.3 GHz by use of the SSPD receiver. With this low-jitter detector we were able to achieve a QBER below 1% out to 20 km simulated transmission distance. As a consequence of the increased loss in the quantum channel of 2.2 dBkm⁻¹, the rate of the raw events at the detector decreases with distance, leading to a corresponding decrease in NBR. The dominant error contribution in the 1–20 km range is the polarisation contrast, and not the dark count rate. At 25 ± 0.11 km the estimated QBER is 3.6 ± 0.2%, due to the rising influence of dark counts (below 10 Hz per SSPD channel). Although the dark count probability within the coincidence window is low, the greatly reduced rate of incident photons at the detector means that the QBER shows a significant increase. This overall behaviour of

the QBER contrasts with previous results in this test bed for Si SPADs with 400 ps jitter clocked at 2 GHz, where intersymbol interference prevented the QBER from falling below 5 %, and QBER rises above 11 %, the limit for secure transmission according to (1), at 12 km [5]. The detection efficiency of the SSPD at a wavelength of 850 nm is ~5 %, compared to 40 % for the Si SPAD, which leads to a corresponding reduction in the photon detection rate at Bob. However, the significantly lower timing jitter of the SSPD results in very low QBERs, allowing improved secrecy efficiency compared to that achieved by use of a Si SPAD. As a result, the maximum NBR (at short transmission distances) was similar for SSPDs used in a 3.3 GHz clocked system and for Si SPADs in a 2 GHz clocked system [15], but the SSPDs offer a clear improvement in overall transmission range.

Conclusions: We have demonstrated the impact of an SSPD detector in a high bit rate QKD test bed at a clock frequency of 3.3 GHz and a transmission wavelength of 850 nm. The maximum NBR achieved is comparable to that of the more widely used Si SPADs at 2 GHz [15], with greatly improved secrecy efficiency. The low jitter of the SSPD allows low QBER to be achieved for significantly longer simulated transmission distances (up to 25 km). We emphasise that there is considerable scope for further improvements in performance using this detector in the realm of high bit rate QKD. The SSPD can be used at 1310 or 1550 nm wavelengths, where fibre transmission losses are significantly lower, allowing the system transmission range to be extended significantly [16]. The low jitter of the detector (68 ps FWHM) means that system clock rates can in principle be increased to ~10 GHz. Furthermore, new designs incorporating SSPDs into optical cavities allow significant improvements in detection efficiency (up to 57 %) [17]. Both the increased clock rates and detection efficiencies afforded by the SSPDs will lead to dramatic improvements in NBR.

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