

First constraints on binary black hole environments with LIGO-Virgo observations

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The LIGO-Virgo analyses of signals from compact binary mergers observed so far have assumed isolated binary systems in a vacuum, neglecting the potential presence of astrophysical environments. We present here the first investigation of environmental effects on each of the events of GWTC-1 and two low-mass events from GWTC-2. We find no evidence for the presence of environmental effects. Most of the events decisively exclude the scenario of dynamical fragmentation of massive stars as their formation channel. GW170817 results in the most stringent upper bound on the medium density ($\lesssim 21 \text{ g/cm}^3$). We find that environmental effects can substantially bias the recovered parameters in the vacuum model, even when these effects are not detectable. We forecast that the Einstein Telescope and B-DECIGO will be able to probe the environmental effects of accretion disks and superradiant boson clouds on compact binaries.

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1. Introduction

LIGO-Virgo-KAGRA (LVK) routinely conducts analyses looking for gravitational-wave (GW) events, including parameter estimation, population and cosmology studies, and tests of general relativity (GR) [2–15]. These analyses have traditionally assumed GW sources exist in a vacuum. However, there is a growing interest in understanding the impact of astrophysical environments on these observations, particularly in scenarios like binary black hole (BBH) formation in star clusters [16–21] and active galactic nuclei (AGN) accretion disks [23, 24]. While prior studies mainly focused on LISA-relevant sources [25–32], we explore LVK’s current ability to detect environmental effects in events of the first LIGO-Virgo catalog (GWTC-1) provided by the Gravitational Wave Open Science Center (GWOSC) [1]. We perform a Bayesian analysis to identify environmental effects and constrain the environment density. This study introduces a parameterized post-Newtonian (PN) test tailored for lower-mass binary systems, addressing environmental effects during the inspiral stage. Geometrized units with $G = c = 1$ are used throughout.

2. Environmental effects

In astrophysical environments, the phase evolution of compact binaries is subject to modifications due to various effects: accretion affects the masses of binary components and the orbital phase. In some media, Bondi-Hoyle-Lyttleton accretion (BHLA)[35] is a good description of the binary accretion scenario. In other cases, such as environments with particle dark matter overdensities or plasmas around black holes, collisionless accretion (CA) provides a better description. For LVK binaries, accretion dynamical friction (DF) [33, 34] from the gravitational wake in the medium are expected to be the most prominent effects on the GW phase evolution for binaries in quasi-circular orbits. While the specifics of these effects depend on the particular environment and binary source, certain generic features can be well approximated through semi-analytic expressions. These effects generally result in small corrections, $\delta\widehat{\Phi}_k$, to the vacuum GW phase, ϕ^{vac} . These corrections introduce additive terms at different low negative PN orders ($k = -4.5\text{PN}, -5.5\text{PN}$) in the GW phase evolution [43] in the following way

$$\delta\widehat{\Phi}_k \propto -\beta_k \rho M^2 \tag{1}$$

where the expressions for β_k are shown in Tab.1.

Table 1: Dependence of environmental dephasing coefficients on physical parameters.

Effect	β_k	k
CA	$\frac{125\pi(1-3\eta)}{357\eta^2}$	-4.5
BHLA	$\frac{125\pi[1-5\eta(1-\eta)]}{1824\eta^4}$	-5.5
DF	$\frac{25\pi(1-3\eta)}{304\eta^3}$	-5.5

	GW150914	GW151012	GW151226	GW170104	GW170608	GW170729	GW170809	GW170814	GW170817	GW170818	GW170823
$\delta\Phi_{-4.5\text{PN}}$	-2.09	0.86	-4.20	-1.29	-4.95	-	-1.91	-3.17	-5.45	-2.55	-
$\delta\Phi_{-11\text{PN}}$	-3.30	0.77	-5.52	-3.33	-6.17	-	-2.59	-2.81	-6.47	-2.57	-

Table 2: Logarithmic Bayes factor ($\log_{10} \mathcal{B}_{\text{vac}}^{\text{env}}$) for GWTC-1 events. For the events GW170729 and GW170823, we could not find informative $\delta\Phi_k$ posteriors even with a broad prior range due to the low SNR of their inspiral.

3. Bayesian analysis

We introduce an agnostic dephasing parameter $\delta\Phi_k$ representing the environmental shift in the GW phase. In frequency domain, the phase of a binary in an environment is given by:

$$\phi^{\text{env}} = \phi^{\text{vac}} + \frac{3}{128\eta} \delta\Phi_k v^k, \quad (2)$$

with $v := (\pi M_z f)$, where $f/2$ denotes the orbital frequency and we define $M_z := (1+z)M$, with M the binary's total mass (in the source frame) and z the cosmological redshift to the source. The symmetric mass ratio is defined as $\eta := m_1 m_2 / M^2$, ρ is the (local) average mass density of the environment and $k = -4.5$ for CA, and $k = -5.5$ for BHLA or DF. We adopt the model-agnostic framework of parameterized tests of GR [36] to incorporate this environmental correction. Our waveform models IMRPhenomPv2 [37–39] and IMRPhenomPv2_NRTidalv2 [40] for BBH and binary neutron star (BNS) systems, respectively, account for spin-induced precession effects. We perform Bayesian parameter estimation to measure $\delta\Phi_k$ and assess the evidence for the environment. The Bayes factor $\mathcal{B}_{\text{vac}}^{\text{env}}$ compares the hypotheses: (i) data d described by the environmental model \mathcal{H}_{env} with nonzero $\delta\Phi_k$, and (ii) data described by the vacuum model \mathcal{H}_{vac} with no additional parameters. We obtain the marginalized posterior probability distribution of $\delta\Phi_k$ within \mathcal{H}_{env} using Bayes' rule with a zero-centred uniform prior for $\delta\Phi_k$. We choose the prior range of $\delta\Phi_k$ to ensure sampler convergence to the global maximum, considering the sensitivity to low-mass systems. To address specific environmental effects causing phase deformation, we vary a single phase parameter at a time.

4. Results

We analyzed the eleven events in GWTC-1: almost all events showed negative log Bayes factor values, Tab.2, except for GW151012, which remained inconclusive due to its low statistical significance. While the data do not support the evidence for an environment around the analysed events, the possibility of an environmental influence cannot be definitely ruled out. Environmental corrections appear most effective in the early inspiral phase, but their detection can be challenging due to noise.

We use the results to estimate upper limits on environmental density as shown in Fig.1. For events

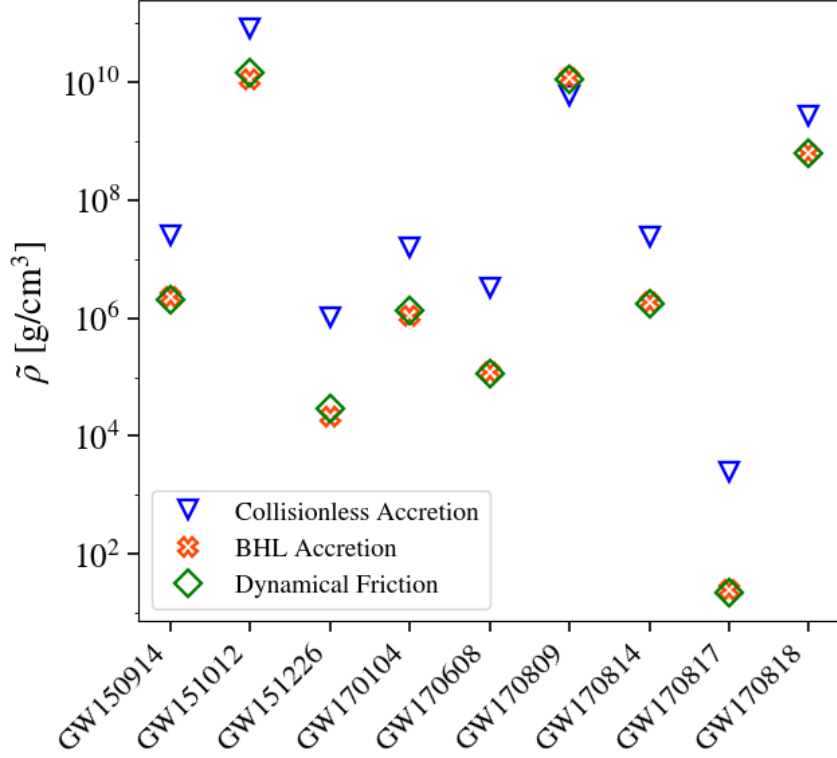


Figure 1: 90% upper bounds on the environmental density obtained considering the effect of CA (blue triangle), BHLA (red cross), and DF (green diamond).

GW150914, GW151226, GW170104, GW170608, GW170814, and GW170817, we find density constraints in the range of $\rho \lesssim \times 10^6 \text{g/cm}^3$, decisively ruling out the binary formation scenario of dynamical fragmentation [41, 42]. However, for the remaining events, characterized by low inspiral SNR and fewer inspiral cycles, the density constraints are inconclusive. Of particular note is the constraint from GW170817, where we obtain $\rho \lesssim 21 \text{g/cm}^3$. This constraint stands out as the tightest result in GWTC-1, and it roughly corresponds to the density of gold at room temperature on Earth.

5. Prospects

In Figure 2, we show the required SNR for detecting environmental effects versus the environmental density curves, needed to obtain a $\log_{10} \mathcal{B}_{\text{vac}}^{\text{env}} = 3$ for events mimicking GW170817 and GW170608 events. Our results indicate that ET can detect DF effects in a GW170817-like event when the surrounding environment has a density of approximately 10^{-3}g/cm^3 . Additionally, it can identify CA effects in environments about 10^3 times denser. B-DECIGO [22], with its extended low-frequency coverage, will detect environmental effects at even lower densities. For B-DECIGO, DF effects in a GW170817-like event become observable when the environment density is approximately 10^{-12}g/cm^3 , and CA effects are detectable for densities roughly 10^4 times larger.

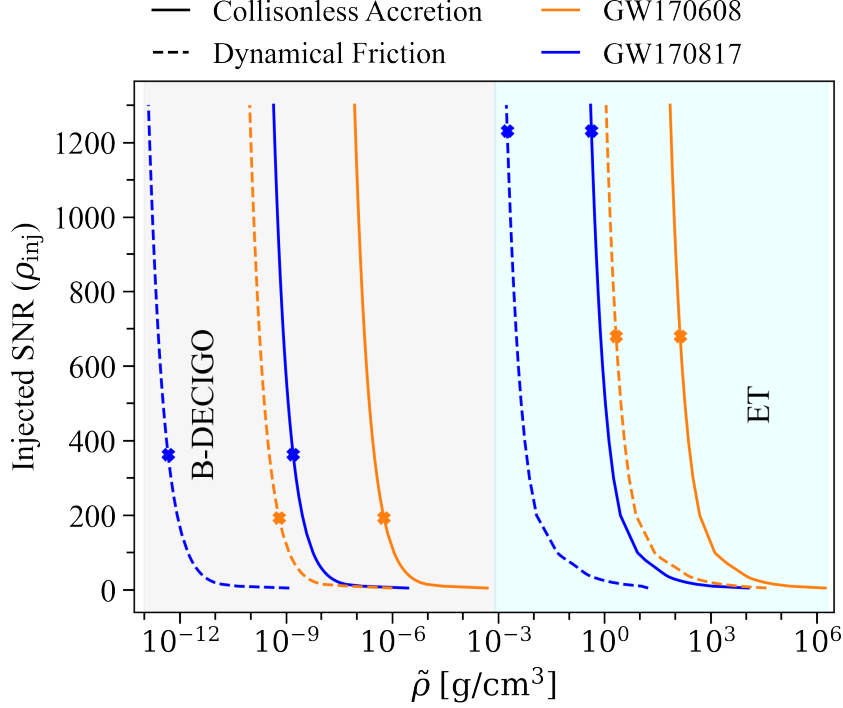


Figure 2: Curves of required SNR for a given density value to achieve $\log_{10} \mathcal{B}_{\text{vac}}^{\text{env}} = 3$ for a specific environmental effect, in the configuration of the third-generation detector ET (cyan shade) and the Japanese space-detector B-DECIGO (gray shade). The dots represent the expected SNR if we replace the LIGO-Hanford detector with those future detectors. We omit the BHLA curve since it follows very closely the DF one.

6. Conclusions

We developed a model-agnostic Bayesian analysis to detect environmental effects around compact binary systems, focusing on accretion and DF effects. Our analysis included individual events from the GWTC-1 catalog, and we found no evidence supporting the existence of environments around these binaries. We also derived upper bounds on environmental densities. We explored the prospects for future detectors like ET and B-DECIGO. ET showed promise in detecting DF and BHLA effects in environments as diluted as $\rho \sim 10^{-3} \text{g/cm}^3$, while B-DECIGO’s low-frequency sensitivity extended the reach to even less dense environments. Our model-agnostic approach aimed to assess the detectors’ overall capability and derive initial constraints. Future work will focus on specific environments and consider higher multipoles for asymmetric binaries.

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