# Efficient photon detection from color centers in a diamond optical waveguide

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A common limitation of experiments using color centers in diamond is the poor photon collection efficiency of microscope objectives due to refraction at the diamond interface. We present a simple and effective technique to detect a large fraction of photons emitted by color centers within a planar diamond sample by detecting light that is guided to the edges of the diamond via total internal reflection. We describe a prototype device using this “side-collection” technique, which provides a photon collection efficiency $\eta_c \approx 91\%$ for the side-collection technique, depending on details of the experimental geometry, diamond chip surface properties, etc. Note that this estimate neglects reabsorption of NV fluorescence by other NVs in the diamond, which is a negligible effect for the diamond sample used in the measurements described below, but may be significant for diamonds with much larger NV concentrations.

We estimated the expected efficiency of the side-collection technique using theoretical models of the average NV emission pattern and realistic approximations of the diamond chip geometry and acceptance angles of the detectors. We find that $\eta_c \approx 91\%$ of the NV fluorescence is confined by TIR between the polished (100) planar surfaces of the diamond chip, and $\eta_c \approx 91\%$ reaches the detectors on first incidence of the photons with the diamond chip sides (edges). Much of the light also undergoes TIR off the sides, but may reach the detectors after many reflections within the diamond. We therefore expect $\eta_c \approx 91\%$ for the side-collection technique, depending on details of the experimental geometry, diamond chip surface properties, etc. Note that this estimate neglects reabsorption of NV fluorescence by other NVs in the diamond, which is a negligible effect for the diamond sample used in the measurements described below, but may be significant for diamonds with much larger NV concentrations.

We constructed a prototype device to compare the side-collection technique to fluorescence detection using a microscope objective [Figs. 2(a)–2(c)]. This prototype instrument employed a [100]-oriented diamond chip (4.3 mm ×
4.3 mm × 0.2 mm) grown via chemical vapor deposition (CVD) with a high NV density ~10^{15} \text{cm}^{-3} (Apollo Diamond, Inc.) [Fig. 1(d)]. Four 650-nm long-pass optical filters (Edmund Optics NT62-979, cut into rectangular pieces with a water jet cutter) were placed in contact with the edges of the diamond. The filters transmitted most of the NV fluorescence band (≈637–800 nm), while reflecting scattered 532-nm light used to excite the NVs. Four chip-style Si photodiodes (Advanced Photonix PDB-C609-2) were affixed to the back of the filters. Because the filters were on a 2-mm-thick quartz substrate, large active-area photodiodes (6 mm × 7 mm) were employed to maximize the detection acceptance angle. Future designs may employ smaller detectors with thin optical filters, and fewer detectors if one or more edges of the diamond chip are polished and mirror coated.

We calibrated the prototype device’s photon side-collection efficiency by comparing it against a microscope objective with known \( \eta_d \), using a wide-field epifluorescence microscope configuration [Fig. 2(a)]. Light from a 532-nm laser was focused into the diamond sample by a microscope air objective (NA = 0.40). The objective also collected NV fluorescence, and directed it to a filter and photodiode identical to those used for side collection. The objective’s low NA guaranteed that its line of sight was not obstructed by the side-collection filters. In Fig. 2(d), we compare the integrated number of fluorescence photons detected with the two collection modalities during a 300-ns duration pulse of 532-nm excitation laser light, at various laser powers. The integrated photon count was measured by alternately connecting a charge-sensitive amplifier (Cremat Inc. CR-112) to the photodiode(s) of the two collection paths, and recording the average signal amplitude [Fig. 2(c)]. We found that the side-collection signal had a 100 ± 5 times larger photon count than the microscope objective signal under identical experimental conditions. The theoretically estimated collection efficiency for the microscope objective was 0.59%.14,15 Transmission losses through the objective, dichroic, and filter reduced the fraction of light reaching the detector to \( \eta_l \approx 0.47\% \). The average quantum efficiency of the photodiode within the NV emission band at near-normal incidence \( \approx 0.39\% \). This implies that the NV fluorescence detection efficiency of the side-collection prototype device \( \approx 39\% \), while the fraction of photons reaching the four side-collection photodiodes (over a wide range of incidence angles) was \( \geq 47\% \). Note that this is \( \approx 5 \) times larger than the ideal collection efficiency of a microscope objective with NA = 1.49, neglecting losses between the objective and detector.14,15

We also confirmed that the optical signals in the two detection paths were due to NV fluorescence by sweeping the frequency of a microwave field across the characteristic NV electron spin resonance at 2.87 GHz, with zero magnetic field.31 The fluorescence signal in both detection paths decreased on resonance by a similar amount \( \approx 17\% \), indicating that the side-collection filters selected NV fluorescence as effectively as conventional fluorescence microscopy.
detectable magnetic field $b_{\text{min}}$ from a single measurement with duration $t_m$, assuming that $T/t_m$ measurements are made during an averaging interval $T$:

$$\eta = \frac{b_{\text{min}}}{\sqrt{t_m}} \approx \frac{\pi \hbar}{4\mu_B (S/\sigma) \beta \tau},$$

(1)

where $\mu_B$ is the Bohr magneton, $S/\sigma$ is the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) of a single measurement, and $\beta$ is the measurement contrast (amplitude divided by mean of the ac magnetometry curve). For magnetometry measurements at zero ac field amplitude with $t_m = 57 \mu s$, we found $S/\sigma = 1.4 \times 10^3$ [see Fig. 3(c)], corresponding to a sensitivity $\approx 100 \text{ pT}/\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$. For an ideal measurement, $t_m \approx \tau \approx T_2$, and the SNR is limited by photon shot noise, $S/\sigma = \sqrt{N}$, where $N$ is the number of photons detected in a single measurement, so that $\eta \propto 1/(\beta \sqrt{N} T_2)$. The best previously reported NV magnetometer sensitivity was $4 \text{ nT}/\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$, using a single NV in an isotopically pure diamond with $T_2 = 1.8 \text{ ms}$, where typically $\beta \approx 0.15$ and $N \approx 0.024$ for such measurements. For our ac magnetometry measurement, $N \approx 2 \times 10^4$, illustrating the improved SNR that can be obtained by making ensemble measurements with enhanced collection efficiency. From Eq. (1) and the shot-noise-limited SNR ($\sqrt{N} = 1.4 \times 10^4$), we would have expected an ideal sensitivity $\approx 1 \text{ pT}/\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$, but our magnetometer sensitivity was instead limited by electrical noise in the detection circuitry of the prototype side-collection device. We expect that this added noise can be significantly reduced in future, optimized side-collection instruments, and that shot-noise-limited sensitivities below $1 \text{ pT}/\sqrt{\text{Hz}}$ could be achieved by increasing the measurement volume, and lengthening the NV $T_2$ through diamond engineering and dynamic decoupling techniques.

The photon detection enhancement of the side-collection technique has many other potential applications. For example, magnetometry may be extended to magnetic field imaging by using a thin layer of NVs near the diamond chip surface by scanning the laser focus while making time-resolved side-collection fluorescence measurements. The high SNR provided by side collection also greatly increases the speed of NV ensemble measurements, which may be used to study decoherence processes and develop NV spin manipulation protocols for magnetometry and quantum information. For example, the NV decoherence and magnetometry data shown in Fig. 3 was generated with $<0.3 \text{ s}$ signal averaging time per data point, which is orders of magnitude shorter than the time that would be required to achieve comparable SNR using a microscope objective. The side-collection technique should also be applicable to single NV measurements using a tightly focused laser beam for NV excitation. However, because side collection accepts out-of-focus light, a thin, pure diamond would likely be required to isolate single NVs in the excitation volume. Using side collection to increase the photon count rate from a single NV could increase the speed and precision of NV super-resolution imaging and magnetometry. It would also improve NV quantum-state readout fidelity, and may be used in conjunction with existing techniques to achieve single-shot readout of the NV spin for quantum information applications.
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