

SETI in the Spatial-Temporal Survey Domain

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ABSTRACT

Traditional searches for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI) or “technosignatures” focus on dedicated observations of single stars or regions in the sky to detect excess or transient emission from intelligent sources. The latest generation of synoptic time domain surveys enable an entirely new approach: spatial–temporal SETI, where technosignatures may be discovered from spatially resolved sources or multiple stars over time. Current optical time domain surveys such as ZTF and the Evryscope can probe 10–100 times more of the “Cosmic Haystack” parameter space volume than many radio SETI investigations. Small-aperture, high cadence surveys like Evryscope can be comparable in their Cosmic Haystack volume completeness to deeper surveys including LSST. Investigations with these surveys can also be conducted at a fraction of the cost, since they require analysis of data already being gathered. However, SETI methodology has not widely utilized such surveys, and the literature is in need of new search algorithms that can incorporate signals from both the spatial and temporal domains. Here I describe the broad potential for modern wide-field time domain optical surveys to revolutionize our search for technosignatures, and illustrate some new example SETI approaches that utilize the spatial-temporal domain

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite more than half a century of activity, the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) is a field of study very much in its infancy. [Wright et al. \(2018\)](#) note the volume of parameter space for SETI (or the search for a needle amongst the “cosmic haystack”) at radio wavelengths has been barely explored, and that many obvious signals may indeed be awaiting our discovery. The lack of SETI activity by the astronomical community can be partially understood as due to funding limitations in recent decades, as well as social pressures against studying SETI experienced by professional astronomers and organizations ([Wright & Oman-Reagan 2018](#)).

Traditional SETI work also requires time-consuming observations, often through dedicated monitoring of nearby stars by radio telescopes. Such observing campaigns are expensive and difficult to obtain given the competitive nature of telescope allocation. Recent progress for systematic “technosignature” searches has been made by Breakthrough Listen ([Worden et al. 2017](#); [Isaacson et al. 2017](#)), primarily at radio wavelengths (e.g. [Price et al. 2018](#)).

The SETI conundrum has always been not only “*What should we look for?*”, but also “*When, where, and how*

to look?”. While [Wright et al. \(2018\)](#) suggest the completeness of our search of the “cosmic haystack” at radio wavelengths is akin to the ratio of a swimming pool compared to the Earth’s ocean’s ($\sim 10^{-20}$), SETI at optical wavelengths is surely many orders of magnitude less complete. However, new wide-field time domain surveys will enable us to greatly expand our search in two key dimensions of parameter space: 1) collectively observing nearly the entire night sky, and 2) providing time resolved monitoring over many years.

Surveys like the currently running Zwicky Transient Facility (ZTF [Bellm 2014](#)) and the upcoming Large Synoptic Survey Telescope (LSST [Ivezić et al. 2008](#)) will be transformative in enabling both reproducible and cost-efficient SETI. By developing search strategies that utilize public survey databases and real-time “alert streams”, both of which are being developed to facilitate a wide range of science goals from these facilities, optical survey SETI can be conducted automatically. As new search algorithms are developed, these databases can be quickly re-analyzed, providing a much-needed level of reproducibility and transparency that will help reduce the “giggle factor” stigma for SETI ([Wright & Oman-Reagan 2018](#)).

In this paper I explore the potential for wide-field time domain surveys in conducting a new generation of technosignature searches, starting with an overview of the motivation for doing SETI with optical surveys in §2. In §3 I describe the general principles behind

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technosignature searches in time domain surveys, including spatial over-densities of light curve signals and coordinated signals between multiple sources, for example. In §4 I introduce several relevant surveys, and use the “Cosmic Haystack” search volume metric developed by Wright et al. (2018) to quantitatively compare these surveys to current radio SETI approaches. The data-driven spatial-temporal domain explored by these surveys necessitates new SETI approaches be developed, and in §5 I outline an example signal where transiting planets around many stars could act as a spatially distributed beacon network. Finally in §6 I discuss ideas for other search approaches, and the advantages in cost and reproducibility of conducting SETI with current and upcoming optical time domain surveys.

2. WHY OPTICAL SURVEY SETI?

Wide-field imaging surveys, and their associated infrastructure, are an ideal data source for carrying out technosignature searches that augment efforts in other wavelengths or with different observing strategies. By covering large portions of the night sky with repeated imaging, and with surveys that span years to decades in duration, we can substantially reduce the challenge of deciding *when* and *where* to look. Increasingly, multiple surveys obtain imaging that overlaps in both time and sky coverage, but with complimentary properties (e.g. imaging depth, cadence, wavelength coverage), which allows for rapid vetting and characterization of rare or low signal-to-noise events.. This also results in survey data providing some “ground truth” about the nature of most known objects in our Galaxy (e.g. their positions, temperatures, etc), and allows us to eliminate uncertainty on *what* objects we’re studying for SETI.

Optical surveys are also an excellent platform for exploring *how* to conduct technosignature searches. The large archives of data produced from these surveys become valuable legacies that enable science long after data acquisition has concluded. Searches for new phenomena in time-domain astronomy can be carried out both in the future with new observations and in the past by re-analyzing survey archives. Using survey archives for SETI as opposed to targeted observations allows us to compare the results of competing algorithms or strategies, and enables reproducible science. Search algorithms are also portable, and ideally can be used to carry out SETI on any appropriately structured large survey. As future survey data is gathered, new classes of technosignature signals may be detectable that rely on decades worth of data. Since any candidate technosignature detection will (or should) be the subject of great scrutiny, making the data and algorithms open

and reproducible will be critical for comparison and independent validation.

Large surveys, particularly ground-based efforts like LSST, are a highly prioritized component of the current and future development landscape in astronomy (Council 2010). As such, great efforts are being made to develop survey tools and technologies to enable science from these missions, such as new database technologies (Juric 2012). These developments are especially needed to utilize the new forms of data being made available, including real-time data analysis (e.g. Schwamb et al. 2019) and broadcasting real-time alerts for events (Patterson et al. 2019). The infrastructure needed to conduct technosignature searches with these large optical surveys is therefore already being developed. As with many areas of astrophysics in the “survey era”, the biggest restriction to SETI with large surveys is therefore the availability of supported researchers mine the data.

3. POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

SETI with large surveys falls into two basic approaches: 1) classify every object or phenomena in the data, and any remaining outliers are technosignature candidates, or 2) search for specific “impossible” or unusual types of signals in the data, which I advocate for in this work. While the latter strategy does not guarantee a complete search for all SETI signals in the data, it is technically feasible for almost any time domain survey.

Several types of signals have been suggested that may be viable for use with optical surveys. For example, Villarroel et al. (2016) searched two wide field, single-epoch optical surveys for objects “disappearing” over decades timescales. Lacki (2019) outline a method to search for specular reflections of interplanetary objects, particularly in wide field surveys. Arnold (2005) describe the observable signature of transits from artificial objects, which could be searched for with exoplanet transit surveys. Kipping & Teachey (2016) find that exoplanet transits could be hidden or “cloaked” to an observer by using directed laser emission.

Here I describe a few general classes of technosignature signals that may be well suited to developing new detection algorithms for spatial-temporal surveys:

1. **Unusual variability profiles or statistical distributions of fluxes** – either on short timescales such as Boyajian’s Star (Boyajian et al. 2015), or long timescales such as disappearing stars (Villarroel et al. 2016) or occasionally missing transits (Kipping & Teachey 2016)

2. **Spatial correlations of events or phenomena** – e.g. coordination of transiting systems, or rebroadcasting events such as novae along the “SETI ellipse” (Makovetskii 1977; Lemarchand 1994; Tarter 2001; Shostak 2004)
3. **Spatial over-density or distribution** – e.g. an over-density of a given phenomena, such as within the Earth Transit Zone (Heller & Pudritz 2016), or in spatial clusters
4. **Unnatural patterns** – particularly patterns of otherwise normal astrophysical variability, such as broadcasting a prime or fibonacci sequence of transits (Arnold 2005; Wright et al. 2016).

4. COMPARING OPTICAL SURVEYS TO RADIO SEARCHES

Wright et al. (2018) have provided a framework to quantify the volume of observable parameter space covered by various SETI projects – dubbed the “Cosmic Haystack”. The properties for several major radio SETI projects yield a Haystack volume coverage of 10^{-20} to 10^{-18} , or as Wright et al. (2018) illustrate, akin to a drinking glass of water compared to the volume of Earth’s oceans. While this tool was developed with radio surveys in mind, it is broadly applicable to surveys at other wavelengths that are not explicitly designed for SETI (e.g. see Forgan 2019).

While the potential for optical time domain surveys to advance technosignature searches has been qualitatively laid out in §2, it is important to quantitatively compare them to traditional searches in the radio. For typical optical surveys using broadband photometry (Djorgovski et al. 2013), the key parameters that determine the Cosmic Haystack volume coverage are the sky coverage (Ω in sq deg), total integration time per target (T in sec), and survey sensitivity or per-epoch depth (S in Jy). Since these terms all act as scalars in the Haystack volume integration, surveys with different properties (e.g. few deep exposures versus many shallow exposures) can have comparably large Haystack coverage, filling out very different portions of the search volume. For maximum impact, SETI should therefore be conducted on many types of surveys.

As a demonstration, I have computed the Cosmic Haystack volume coverage for five representative current and future optical time domain surveys, as shown in Figure 1. This includes the Catalina Real Time Transient Survey (CRTS; Drake et al. 2009), Zwicky Transient Facility (ZTF; Bellm 2014), the Transiting Exoplanet Survey Satellite (TESS; Ricker et al. 2015), the Large Synoptic Survey Telescope (LSST; Ivezić et al. 2008), and

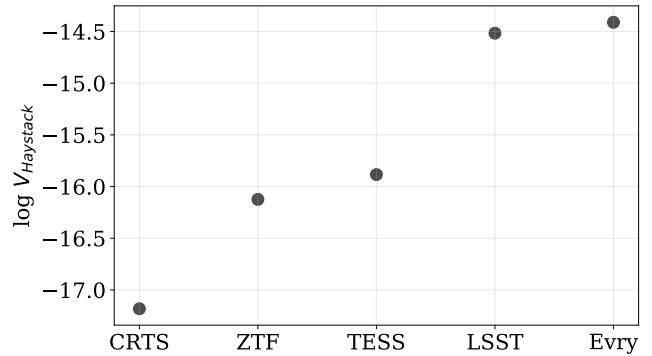


Figure 1. Comparison of the 8-D “Cosmic Haystack” SETI search volume fraction, defined by Wright et al. (2018), computed using five optical surveys with varying designs. The Haystack fraction covered by these optical surveys is 1-2 dex larger than typical SETI programs conducted in the radio. Evryscope Law et al. (2015) is the best survey considered here for SETI work, narrowly beating LSST due to its wide field of view and very dense light curves.

the Evryscope (Law et al. 2015). These include space-based and traditional ground-based surveys, and vary greatly in telescope collecting area, total numbers of visits, and survey footprint design. I have assumed sensitivity (S) is the published per-visit photometric depth for each survey. The total integration time per target (T) was computed as the average number of visits per target in the survey multiplied by the per-visit exposure time. The same power of transmitter is assumed as in Wright et al. (2018). The code to generate the figures in this manuscript is online.¹

Typical values for the Haystack fraction for radio SETI programs as presented in Wright et al. (2018) are in the range of $\log V_{\text{Haystack}} = 20 - 17$. However, these programs are mostly targeted observations of nearby stars. The largest program featured in Wright et al. (2018), by Tingay et al. (2018), had $\Omega = 400$ sq deg and $T = 10800$ seconds, and yielded $\log V_{\text{Haystack}} = -17.36$.

By comparison, the wide field optical surveys I have featured all outperform the radio programs explored by Wright et al. (2018) in their Haystack fraction. Due to its very wide field coverage, and near continuous monitoring each night, Evryscope (abbreviated as “Evry” in Figure 1) ranks as the best optical survey for technosignature searches of those surveyed here. The remarkable similarity in Haystack fraction between Evryscope, which uses 7-cm diameter telescopes, and the 8.4-m LSST survey reinforces the need to sample the Cosmic

¹ https://github.com/TheAstroFactory/survey_seti

Haystack volume with as many different survey “shapes” as possible.

Wright et al. (2018) likened their Haystack fraction to searching for fish in a drinking glass of water compared to the Earth’s oceans,. Our results for SETI with optical surveys are closer to 1-2 Olympic sized swimming pools (each 2500 m³, according FINA standards) compared to the Earth’s oceans². While optical surveys still only cover a tiny fraction of the total volume of parameter space, it is a substantial improvement.

5. EXAMPLE: DISTRIBUTION OF TRANSITING EXOPLANETS IN THE *KEPLER* FIELD

To illustrate the potential for possible technosignature searches in the spatial-temporal survey domain, in this section I demonstrate two examples of signals that rely on samples of transiting exoplanets. Transits are a promising target for SETI since they are relatively efficient to find over wide areas with surveys like *Kepler* (Borucki et al. 2010) or TESS, and they represent a natural “Schelling point” to attract attention with (Wright 2017). Creating such a beacon requires either generating a transiting system with unusual properties or patterns (e.g. Arnold 2005; Kipping & Teachey 2016; Forgan 2017), or as outlined in §3 an unusual *distribution* of transiting systems. The two examples outlined here explore the latter scenario, though I note the former is also well suited to automated approaches that would make use of future surveys and should be developed further. While I do not advocate these specific metrics are ideal for SETI, they demonstrate the type of signals we should design software systems to find in modern surveys.

5.1. Two-Point Correlation Function

The easiest conceptual method to search for a technosignature beacon in the spatial distribution of exoplanets would be looking for over-densities, i.e. regions with an unusually large number of transiting systems. However this requires a large and very uniform sampling of exoplanets per square degree to determine if the density is unusual. Such spatially uniform samples are difficult to achieve since e.g. bright stars can saturate large regions.

Another simple statistical test is to measure the distribution of exoplanet systems using the two-point angular correlation function (Landy & Szalay 1993). This method measures the probability of finding two sources separated by a given radial distance, and is often used in cosmology to characterize the distribution of galaxies on cosmological scales,. The two-point correlation function

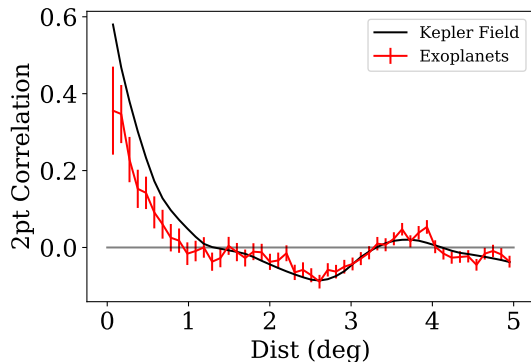


Figure 2. two point correlation function of transiting exoplanets versus all stars in the kepler field. No obvious signs of engineering of the exoplanet population as a whole. exoplanets are actually slightly less correlated on small size scales than stars in general, which may be an artifact of detected planets being around brighter stars in the sample (i.e. having lower total density). While overly simple, this example demonstrates one possible test that could be done using existing and future exoplanet surveys.

is easily measured thanks to generalized functions from packages such as *astroML* (Ivezić et al. 2014), and more efficient approaches have been produced that can scale to very large datasets (e.g. Wang et al. 2013).

In Figure 2 I show the two-point correlation function up to spatial scales of 5 degrees for both the sample of 2,324 transiting exoplanets discovered by the *Kepler* primary mission,³ and for 201,312 stars in the *Kepler* field. Since the sample of exoplanets was relatively small, uncertainties shown in Figure 2 were estimated by bootstrapping the correlation function 500 times. Here the correlation was done using only the (ra,dec) coordinates for each star or exoplanet system, but can also be done for additional dimensions (e.g. including distance, orbital properties, etc).

The correlation functions shown in Figure 2 are not substantively different between the exoplanet and field star populations, indicating no signs of a large-scale “beacon” based on the distribution of exoplanets in the *Kepler* field. The slight differences in the correlation functions are not unexpected, given how sensitive this metric is to sample selection biases and non-uniformity. Indeed, even in “simple” scenarios of galaxy population analyses from well-studied surveys, considerable effort must be made to compare the correlation functions between different samples (e.g. Wang et al. 2013). As the 2-D correlation requires very homogeneous and large samples of sources to plausibly detect outliers with, it

² Calculation done via Wolfram|Alpha

³ Catalog from <http://exoplanetarchive.ipac.caltech.edu>

would be an inefficient metric for a civilization to base a beacon around.

5.2. Clusters of Similarity

more interesting example: how to stand out in exoplanet signals? if the simplest signal is just to indicate the presence of ET, then Q is how to stand out from the field? one idea is a spatial correlation of some exoplanet property, such as radius, eclipse depth, or orbital period. here i propose we search for spatial clusters of exoplanets with unusually similar orbital periods.

to make an ideal transmitter of such a signal, the Q 's are: what period to use, and how many systems need to be detected as similar to be confident something is odd about them? the first Q a civilization might consider either periods that are unusual (long P i think, look at population histogram). But to build such a beacon, might be efficient to balance with detectability since several systems must be detected to stand out, so short orbital period is probably best (easiest to detect).

the second Q is akin to a loaded dice problem (i.e. how many rolls do you need to tell a die isn't rolling fair). The odds of a single random transiting system being a given period is just a random draw from the underlying population, so the height of a bin in the normalized distribution. The odds of N draws is equivalent to multiplying the normalized distribution by itself N times. So looking at a new Figure i'm going to make, we need 4 (?) systems to be within the same bin to be highly unusual... use this to drive choice of N , and for a given result (if positive) estimate the probability

so for every planet in Kepler, i'll measure the.... std-dev? sum of sq differences? some metric of "sameness" of the 4 (?) nearest exoplanets. then the Q is what's the 99% outlier for the sameness distribution? choosing to do this simple numerical approach since the data are noisy, no way to exactly have "same" period....

probably find no candidates, but that'll be AOK since the odds of 4 draws having exact same period should be very low.

6. DISCUSSION

so far we have focused on the need for developing SETI approaches that utilize the new spatial-temporal domain. The data streams from these surveys also enable many other search strategies that could be implemented. these might include: VASCO-type events, stars appearing or disappearing. (Villarroel et al. 2016) - Esp. stars appearing that do not have a Gaia DR2 detection, for example. - need to account for novae, etc... - stars disappearing will be very interesting

coordination/synchronization (Makovetskii 1977; Shostak 2004) - especially the SETI ellipsoid, a'la

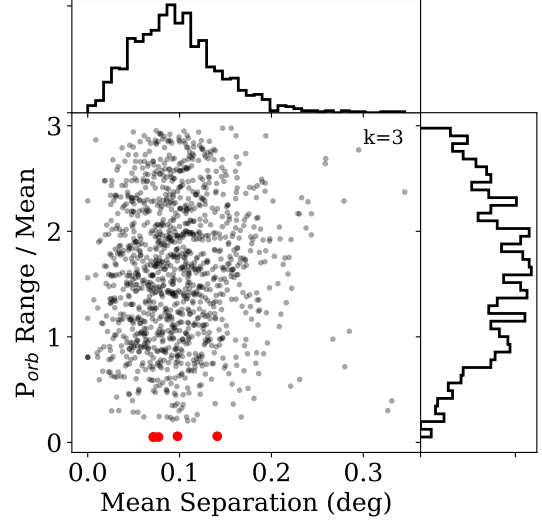


Figure 3. Spread in orbital periods for KNN clusters of exoplanet systems in *Kepler* versus the average angular separation of the cluster. For $K = 3$, 5 clusters have a spread in their periods below 6% (red points). These KNN clusters have typical spatial separations of ~ 0.1 deg.

SN1987A (Lemarchand 1994) - could use galactic novae to provide time/place - -

unnatural patterns of otherwise normal events - look for e.g. flares or novae that recur w/ prime or fibonacci sequences - see forthcoming paper

Surveys like ZTF (and soon LSST) publish real-time alerts of variability from sources. These alert streams could be monitored in real-time for signals as well: alerts from the stars within the "restricted Earth Transit Zone" (Heller & Pudritz 2016) - anytime we can see them w/ ZTF - especially at our opposition (i.e. when we transit) - with Gaia we can track stars that are leaving the ETZ as well, but might have seen us transit previously (or by the time the signal reaches us)

alerts from known exoplanet host systems, especially coinciding with any known transit conjunction (mid-transit), - allow some tolerance window to account for TTVs

The cost of deploying such SETI is remarkably low, since they can "piggyback" on databases and search tools being developed for the primary science drivers of each survey (e.g. transients for ZTF).

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