

# Gravitational-wave Merger Forecasting: Scenarios for the early detection and localization of compact-binary mergers with ground based observatories

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## ABSTRACT

We present the prospects for the early (pre-merger) detection and localization of compact-binary coalescences using gravitational waves over the next 10 years. Early warning can enable the direct observation of the prompt and early electromagnetic emission of a neutron star merger. We examine the capabilities of the ground based detectors at their “Design” sensitivity (2021-2022), the planned “A+” upgrade (2024-2026), and the envisioned “Voyager” concept (late 2020’s). We find that for a fiducial rate of binary neutron star mergers of  $1000 \text{ Gpc}^{-3}\text{yr}^{-1}$ , the Design, A+, and Voyager era networks can provide 18, 54, and 195s of warning for one source per year of observing, respectively, with a sky localization area  $<100 \text{ deg}^2$  at a 90% credible level. At the same rate, the A+ and Voyager era networks will be able to provide 9 and 43s of warning, respectively, for a source with  $<10 \text{ deg}^2$  localization area. We compare the idealized search sensitivity to that achieved by the PyCBC Live search tuned for pre-merger detection. The gravitational-wave community will be prepared to produce pre-merger alerts. Our results motivate the operation of observatories with wide fields-of-view, automation, and the capability for fast slewing to observe simultaneously with the gravitational-wave network.

*Keywords:* gravitational waves — neutron stars — compact binary stars

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The second generation of gravitational-wave observation began in 2015 with the operation of the twin LIGO observatories (Aasi et al. 2015). During the first observing run, the first binary black hole mergers were detected, which provided insight into gravity in the strong-field regime (Abbott et al. 2016a,b,c). The true era of gravitational-wave multi-messenger astronomy, however, began with GW170817, the first observation of a binary neutron star (BNS) merger with gravitational waves (Abbott et al. 2017a). Only a couple seconds following the gravitational-wave signal, a gamma-ray burst was observed by Fermi-GBM and INTEGRAL (Goldstein et al. 2017; Savchenko et al. 2017; Abbott et al. 2017b). About 11 hours later, the optical counterpart was spotted (Coulter et al. 2017) and to date GW170817 has been observed by over 70 observatories spanning

the electromagnetic band and including neutrino and cosmic-ray observatories (Abbott et al. 2017c). The observation of GW170817 has provided an unprecedented look into the nuclear equation of state (Abbott et al. 2018; Radice et al. 2018; Capano et al. 2020), the phenomenon of kilonova (Metzger 2020), and the central engine of short gamma-ray bursts (Murguia-Berthier et al. 2020; Wu & MacFadyen 2019; Lazzati et al. 2020).

However, a crucial gap in these observations are the records of the early time behavior of the optical emission. Optical observations only began hours after the neutron star merger due to the presence of non-Gaussian transient noise in the LIGO-Livingston data requiring manual intervention and preventing the initial automated release of a precise sky localization (Abbott et al. 2017a). Earlier optical and in particular ultraviolet observations would have been able to differentiate kilonova emission models (Arcavi 2018). While the typical latency for automated gravitational-wave alerts has been reduced over time to between tens of seconds to minutes after merger (Abbott et al. 2019a), the holy grail would be to observe a coalescence’s prompt and early electro-

magnetic emission just a matter of seconds after merger. There may be electromagnetic emission which occurs before the merger (Hansen & Lyutikov 2001; Troja et al. 2010; Tsang et al. 2011; Metzger & Zivancev 2016; Wang et al. 2016; Wada et al. 2020). A broad summary of the scientific potential of neutron star merger observations can be found in Burns et al. (2019).

To date, the LIGO and Virgo observatories have detected dozens of gravitational wave sources (Nitz et al. 2019a,c, 2020; Venumadhav et al. 2019a,b; Zackay et al. 2019; Abbott et al. 2019b, 2020b,c,d), two BNS mergers (Abbott et al. 2017a, 2020a), but only a single source, GW170817, had clear electromagnetic counterparts (Abbott et al. 2017c; Nitz et al. 2019b). However, over the coming decade, we expect the sensitivity and capability of ground based gravitational-wave observatories to dramatically increase (Abbott et al. 2016d). To match this, the infrastructure for both the low-latency (Messick et al. 2017; Adams et al. 2016; Hooper et al. 2012; Klimentenko et al. 2016) and pre-merger detection of gravitational waves is being actively developed by multiple groups (Cannon et al. 2012; Chu et al. 2016; Kapadia et al. 2020; Sachdev et al. 2020).

In this letter, we explore the increasing capability of the global gravitational-wave network to detect inspiralling binaries seconds to minutes before merger. We examine the distribution of detectable sources and the evolution of their distance and sky localization over the next several years. Finally, we adapt the existing low-latency search PyCBC Live (Nitz et al. 2018a; Dal Canton et al. 2020) to gauge if the current search methods will continue to be suited for pre-merger detection with the forthcoming global network.

## 2. PRE-MERGER DETECTION OF MERGERS WITH GRAVITATIONAL WAVES

Orbiting compact binaries emit gravitational waves and, due to the loss of orbital energy, inspiral and eventually merge (Peters 1964). For low mass sources, such as BNSs, this ‘inspiral’ phase of the gravitational wave signal is the observable portion. The merger and post-merger gravitational-wave signals are buried in the noise for current instruments, as they occur at frequencies ( $\sim 1$ -4 kHz) beyond the detector’s most sensitive band (Clark et al. 2016).

The most sensitive methods for the detection of compact binary mergers use matched filtering, along with knowledge of a source’s expected gravitational waveform (Brown 2004). The waveform model is typically derived from the post-Newtonian expansion of general relativity for neutron star binaries (Wagoner & Will 1976; Blanchet & Damour 1989; Blanchet 2014). This

procedure is optimal in Gaussian noise to detect a signal from a source with known parameters. The gravitational waveform encodes the properties of the source binary (such as the components’ masses and spins) on the frequency evolution. To cover a broad region of the unknown source parameters, a discrete set of template waveforms, each representing a possible combination of source parameters, is searched.

Analyses differ in the exact procedure (Brown 2004; Usman et al. 2016; Messick et al. 2016; Venumadhav et al. 2019a), but conceptually, all model-based searches for gravitational-wave signals use such a template bank along with matched filtering to extract the signal-to-noise ratio (SNR) produced by the source in the data. Possible candidates are identified, and their SNR is combined across multiple detectors and statistically assessed. Current low-latency analyses typically take 5-30 s from initial data collection to the final assessment and identification of a candidate (Nitz et al. 2018a; Dal Canton et al. 2020; Messick et al. 2017; Hooper et al. 2012).

With this procedure in mind, the goal of pre-merger detection is to identify a candidate gravitational-wave signal early enough to produce an alert before the actual merger is observable from Earth. This means that an initial assessment of the candidate must be made with only the early time (or correspondingly the low frequency) portion of the gravitational-wave signal. To search for the signal at different times before merger, one can expand the idea of the template bank to include a discretization over time before merger. For a particular time before merger, one models the gravitational-wave signal up to only that point in time, and conducts a search in an identical manner as standard analyses. In this way, an identification can be made before the data at time of merger is even collected.

### 2.1. Observatories and simulated source population

In this study, we consider the five ground based observatories currently in operation or under construction, namely LIGO-Hanford (H), LIGO-Livingston (L) (Aasi et al. 2015), LIGO-India (I) (Iyer et al. 2011), Virgo (V) (Acernese et al. 2015), and KAGRA (K) (Akutsu et al. 2019). We split our analysis into three sensitivity epochs in different configurations. We denote these epochs as the ‘Design’ era which covers the expected sensitivity and operation of the detector network starting from 2021-2022, the ‘A+’ era which is timed for the next planned upgrade to the LIGO instruments expected to begin operation in 2024-2026, with LIGO-India joining with equivalent sensitivity towards towards the end of this period (Abbott et al. 2016d), and finally

the ‘‘Voyager’’ era which includes proposed upgrades to the LIGO instruments predicted to begin operation in the late 2020’s (LIGO Scientific Collaboration 2017).

To assess each detector network, we produce a simulated population of  $O(10^5)$  BNS mergers, which are uniformly distributed in volume, and isotropic in binary orientation and sky location. For simplicity of comparison, we choose a reference binary with component masses  $1.4 - 1.4 M_{\odot}$ . However, as described in Sec. 4, our results can be applied to a more generic population. The gravitational waveform is calculated using TaylorF2, a model based on the post-Newtonian approximation to GR (Sathyaprakash & Dhurandhar 1991; Droz et al. 1999; Blanchet 2002; Faye et al. 2012) which is suitable for long duration signals where the merger happens at  $\gtrsim 500$  Hz. Each simulated source is added to Gaussian noise colored with the power spectral density corresponding to each instrument at a particular epoch.

There is significant uncertainty in the actual noise capability that will be achieved by each instrument over time. For the LIGO-Hanford and Livingston detectors, we use the ‘‘Design’’, ‘‘A+’’, and ‘‘Voyager’’ noise curves consistent with Abbott et al. (2016d); Barsotti et al. (2018); Hall (2019). As done in Abbott et al. (2016d), we assume LIGO-India will join the network in the mid 2020s using the ‘‘A+’’ configuration, and from then on will match the sensitivity of the other LIGO observatories. Note, that we use the Virgo design curve in all cases, consistent with the conservative projection from the mid 2020’s in Abbott et al. (2016d). For KAGRA, we use its design curve (Kagra 2016). Future upgrades to Virgo and KAGRA in the late 2020’s may increase their sensitivity during the Voyager era beyond what we consider here.

## 2.2. Source detection and localization

We consider two criteria to define whether a particular simulated source is detected at a given time before merger, and hence measure the capabilities of future detector networks.

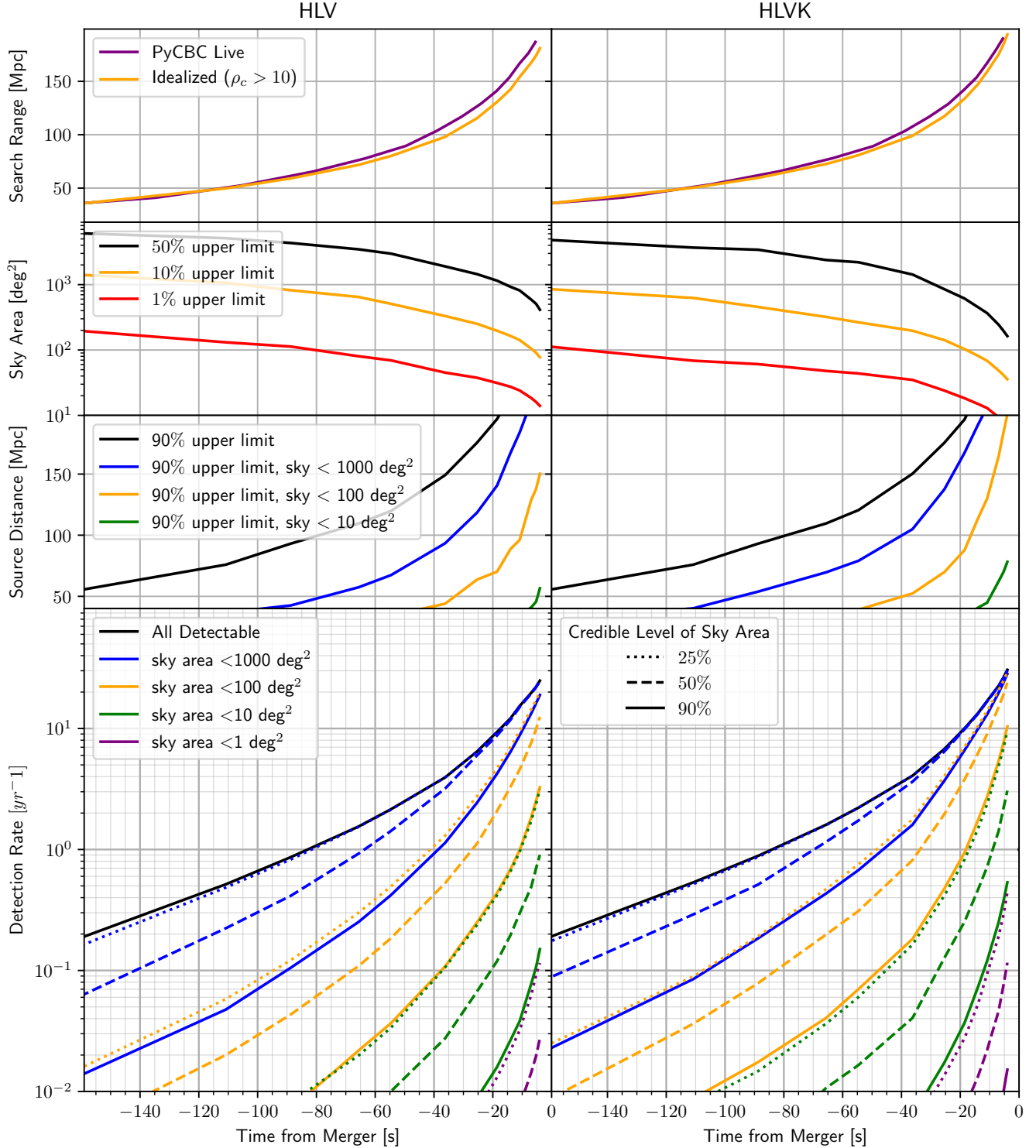
The first criterion is an idealized, simplified analysis which detects any signal having a total network SNR  $> 10$ . This choice is consistent with the threshold for confidently detected mergers in Abbott et al. (2019b); Nitz et al. (2019c). In practice, we may expect a marginally lower threshold (i.e. higher sensitivity), dependent on the rate of confounding non-Gaussian noise transients in future detector networks. For each simulated signal, we calculate its network SNR as a function of time before merger. After a source reaches the re-

quired SNR threshold, we generate the posterior distribution for its spatial localization at each time step before merger. The localization is performed via the rapid Bayestar algorithm, commonly used in production low-latency analyses (Singer & Price 2016).

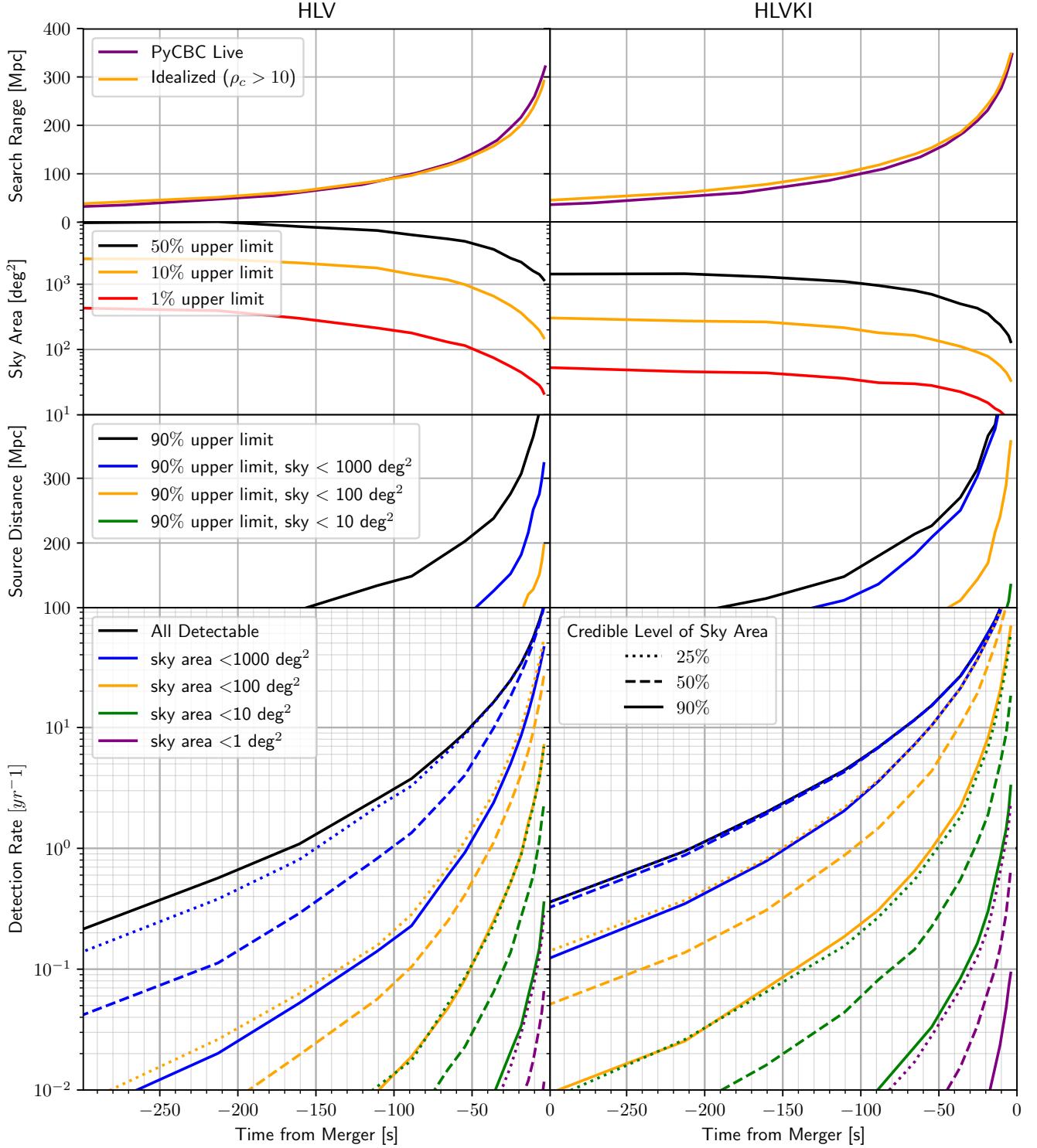
The second detection criterion involves an actual analysis of the simulated data with PyCBC Live (Nitz et al. 2018a; Dal Canton et al. 2020), based on the open-source PyCBC gravitational-wave data analysis library (Nitz et al. 2018b). PyCBC Live is one of several low-latency analyses (Messick et al. 2017; Adams et al. 2016; Hooper et al. 2012; Klimentko et al. 2016) currently used for the rapid detection of gravitational waves by the LIGO-Virgo-KAGRA scientific collaboration and has already been instrumental in the analysis and detection of numerous sources since the second observing run of second-generation detectors (Abbott et al. 2019a). PyCBC Live is computationally efficient, supports searching using arbitrary number of detectors, and is easily reconfigurable, making it suitable for our analysis. Comparing the results of PyCBC Live with our first detection criterion allows us to establish the performance of current low-latency analyses with respect to future detector networks.

PyCBC Live can search for pre-merger signals by using a template bank of truncated TaylorF2 waveforms that discretely sample the time before merger. As the frequency evolution of a TaylorF2 inspiral is monotonic in time, we can truncate it at a particular frequency to approximate a waveform that is similarly truncated at a chosen time before merger. For our analysis, we choose the frequencies corresponding to increments of 5% of the total expected SNR. For each frequency cutoff, we generate a template bank using a standard geometric placement algorithm (Brown et al. 2012).

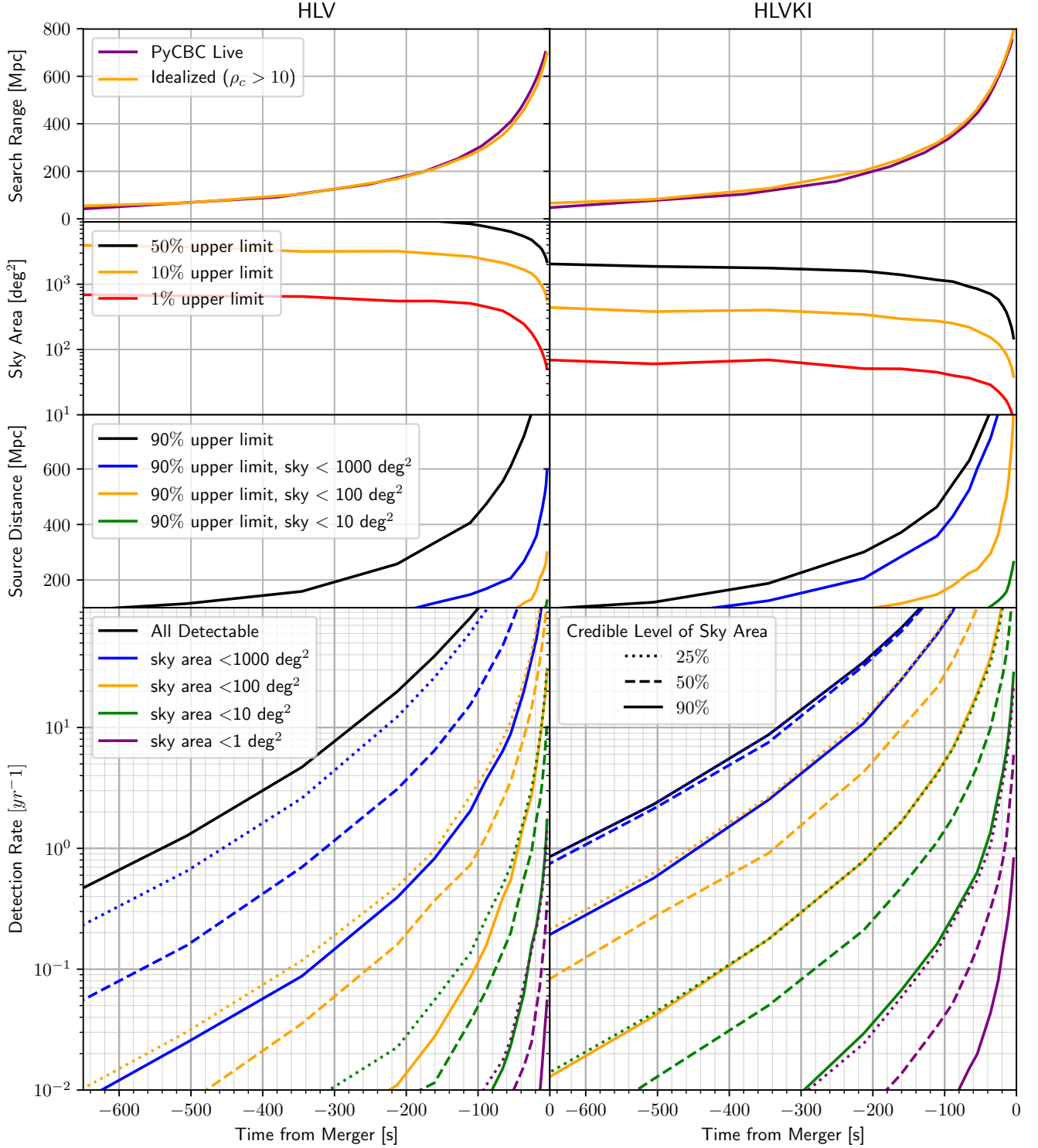
We configure PyCBC Live to minimize the latency incurred by the analysis. By careful choice of the analysis step size, power spectral density estimation, and data preconditioning, we reduce the latency of the PyCBC Live analysis down to a worst case delay of 2.5 s (average of 2 s), measured from the time data is available to the analysis to the moment a candidate is identified. The latency includes the need to collect data for filtering, the computational processing, and also the latency incurred due to the discreteness of the input data (1 s). In practice, however, in addition to this analysis derived latency, the delay from data production, distribution, server communication, and sky localization in total contributes more to the overall latency than the search algorithm itself. Significant work will need to take place in these areas to reduce the total latency below  $\sim 5 - 10$  s.



**Figure 1.** “Design” era (2021-2022) detection and localization for the HLV network (left) and the full gravitational-wave detector network (right) as a function of time before merger for a fiducial 1.4-1.4 $M_{\odot}$  BNS merger. (Top) The sky-averaged detection range for the idealized search and PyCBC Live operating at a false alarm rate of once per year. (Middle) The upper limit on the localization sky area and source distance, respectively, for detectable sources. Sky areas are quoted at the 90% credible level. (Bottom) The detection rate of all sources (black) and those that also have a sky localization less than 1000  $\text{deg}^2$  (blue), 100  $\text{deg}^2$  (orange), 10  $\text{deg}^2$  (green), or 1  $\text{deg}^2$  at a 90% (solid), 50% (dashed), and 25% (dotted).



**Figure 2.** “A+” era (2024-2026) detection and localization for the HLV network (left) and the full gravitational-wave detector network (right) as a function of time before merger for a fiducial  $1.4\text{-}1.4M_{\odot}$  BNS merger. (Top) The sky-averaged detection range for the idealized search and PyCBC Live operating at a false alarm rate of once per year. (Middle) The upper limit on the localization sky area and source distance, respectively, for detectable sources. Sky areas are quoted at the 90% credible level. (Bottom) The detection rate of all sources (black) and those that also have a sky localization less than  $1000\text{ deg}^2$  (blue),  $100\text{ deg}^2$  (orange),  $10\text{ deg}^2$  (green), or  $1\text{ deg}^2$  at a 90% (solid), 50% (dashed), and 25% credible level (dotted).



**Figure 3.** “Voyager” era (late 2020’s) detection and localization for the HLV network (left) and the full gravitational-wave detector network (right) as a function of time before merger for a fiducial  $1.4\text{-}1.4M_{\odot}$  BNS merger. (Top) The sky-averaged detection range for the idealized search and PyCBC Live operating at a false alarm rate of once per year. (Middle) The upper limit on the localization sky area and source distance, respectively, for detectable sources. Sky areas are quoted at the 90% credible level. (Bottom) The detection rate of all sources (black) and those that also have a sky localization less than  $1000\text{ deg}^2$  (blue),  $100\text{ deg}^2$  (orange),  $10\text{ deg}^2$  (green), or  $1\text{ deg}^2$  at a 90% (solid), 50% (dashed), and 25% credible level (dotted).



### 3. DETECTION AND LOCALIZATION CAPABILITIES

Through the simulations described in Section 2 we obtain the search sensitivity, expected rate of detections, and sky localization capabilities as a function of time before merger. These are shown in Figs. 1, 2, and 3 for the “Design”, “A+”, and “Voyager” era networks, respectively. For each era, we compare the reduced “HLV” detector network to the full network appropriate for that era. Note that the times shown in the horizontal axes do *not* include the latency of the analysis, which we expect to vary over the years as technical improvements are made.

We find that the PyCBC Live low-latency search is already comparable to the idealized search, though some improvement may be possible for network configurations with a large number of detectors, whereas for three-detector configurations PyCBC Live already outperforms our simplified analysis when operating at false alarm rate of 1 per year. We can expect further improvements in pre-merger analyses to be made, but it is already clear that existing searches will be fully capable of meeting our predictions throughout the decade, assuming detector noise quality is comparable to previous observation runs.

For  $1.4 - 1.4M_{\odot}$  BNS mergers and a merger rate density of  $\sim 1000 \text{ Gpc}^{-3}\text{yr}^{-1}$  (Abbott et al. 2019b, 2020a), we expect to detect one source per year with a 90% credible sky localization area  $< 100 \text{ deg}^2$  at 18, 54, or 195 s before merger for the “Design”, “A+”, and “Voyager” full networks, respectively. However, note that the warning time and observation rate depend highly on the follow-up strategy. For example, for facilities which are able to target 50% credible regions, the warning time is increased to 34, 104, and 335 s, respectively, or alternatively at the same warning times, we can expect  $\sim 4 - 6$  sources per year instead of one, which more than doubles the expected number of observed counterparts. Similarly, for “A+”, and “Voyager”, we find a single source per year will be localized 9 and 43 s before merger, respectively, with a 90% credible sky area  $< 10 \text{ deg}^2$ . For the 50% credible region, we can increase the candidate rate to  $\sim 6 - 8$  or increase the warning to 26 and 115 s, respectively.

### 4. APPLICATION TO OTHER SOURCES

While for simplicity, we have reported results for a fiducial  $1.4 - 1.4 M_{\odot}$  BNS merger, our results can be straightforwardly applied to other sources by scaling of the time and sensitive distance (or rate/volume as appropriate). The time axis scales inversely with the total

mass of the source so that

$$T_{m_1, m_2} = T_{1.4-1.4} \frac{2.8M_{\odot}}{m_1 + m_2} \quad (1)$$

where  $T_{1.4-1.4}$  is a time from our figures and  $m_{1,2}$  are the desired source’s redshifted component masses. This time rescaling directly accounts for the difference in localization for different mass sources, as the sky localization area is only dependent on the the frequency bandwidth and the detector configuration for long duration signals, where the merger is above the detectors’ sensitive frequency band.

The signal amplitude scales as the  $\frac{5}{6}$ th power of the source’s chirp mass, which implies that volume and detection rate scale as

$$R_{m_1, m_2} = R_{1.4-1.4} \frac{(m_1 m_2)^{3/2}}{(m_1 + m_2)^{1/2}} \frac{2.8^{1/2}}{1.4^3} \quad (2)$$

where  $R_{1.4-1.4}$  is the rate of detections shown in our figures at a merger rate of  $1000 \text{ Gpc}^{-3}\text{yr}^{-1}$ . To illustrate, if we assume that the rate of  $1.4 - 4.0M_{\odot}$  sources were  $100 \text{ Gpc}^{-3}\text{yr}^{-1}$ , then we’d expect for the Voyager era to be able to have 140 seconds of warning for  $\sim 2$  sources per year with sky area  $< 100 \text{ deg}^2$ .

This same scaling may also be applied for heavy binary black hole mergers, as long as we only consider times before merger. After this time, the sky localization distribution is no longer accounted for by a simple time rescaling due to the signal terminating within the most sensitive frequency band. For instance, considering GW190521 (Abbott et al. 2020e), which may have merged within the accretion disk of a supermassive black hole and produced an optical counterpart (Graham et al. 2020), we find that the time scale factor is  $\sim 50$ . Hence, even in an optimistic Voyager era, we could expect no more than a few seconds warning for similar mergers.

### 5. CONCLUSIONS

Achieving the goal of the prompt electromagnetic observation of a compact binary merger requires coordination across different observatories and cutting-edge instruments and facilities with wide fields of view, rapid pointing, and fully automated operation. By simulating a population of neutron star mergers, and the analysis of the associated data with current technology, we have shown that over the next decade the pre-merger warning time may increase by an order of magnitude from  $O(10)$  to  $O(100)$  seconds. For many telescopes, this will not yet be sufficient to re-point and tile a  $100 \text{ deg}^2$  area (Coughlin et al. 2019), although notable exceptions exist (Gehrels et al. 2004; Sagiv et al. 2014), including Swift (Tohuvavohu et al. 2020), ZTF (Dekany

et al. 2020), and the CTA (Acharya et al. 2013). Various facilities may also be able to use pre-merger warnings to alter triggering or observing configurations (James et al. 2019).

It is our hope that with the roadmap we provide, the observing community can plan for continued and automated operation of existing observatories, and envision bold new missions with varied observation bands and the goal of the first forecasted observation of a BNS merger within this decade. This includes concepts such as the Transient Astrophysics Probe (Camp & TAP Team 2019). As GW170817 introduced gravitational waves to the field of multimessenger astronomy, we expect a multimessenger, multiband, prompt observation of a neutron star merger to be an important milestone in rapid time domain astronomy.

Data associated with the simulations is released at <https://github.com/gwastro/gw-merger-forecasting>.

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Software: Numpy (van der Walt et al. 2011), Scipy (Virtanen et al. 2020), Astropy (Robitaille et al. 2013), Matplotlib (Hunter 2007), ligo.skymap (Singer 2018), PyCBC (Nitz et al. 2018b).

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