

Electromagnetic Scintillation

I. Geometrical Optics

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
1. Introduction	1
References	3
2. Waves in Random Media	5
2.1 Maxwell's Equations in Random Media	6
2.2 Describing Random Media	11
2.2.1 Stationary Random Processes	12
2.2.2 Ensemble Averages	13
2.2.3 The Spatial Covariance Description	15
2.2.4 The Structure-function Description	18
2.2.5 The Wavenumber-spectrum Description	21
2.2.6 The Wavenumber Spectrum of Irregularities	27
2.2.7 Describing Anisotropic Irregularities	47
2.2.8 Inhomogeneous Random Media	51
2.3 Tropospheric Parameters	53
2.3.1 Refractive-index Expressions	53
2.3.2 Values of C_n^2 Near the Surface	54
2.3.3 Vertical Profiles of C_n^2	62
2.3.4 Inner-scale Measurements	74
2.3.5 Anisotropy and the Outer Scale Length	78
2.4 Ionospheric Properties	84
2.4.1 The Ambient Ionosphere	86
2.4.2 Observations of Ionospheric Irregularities	90
2.4.3 A Description of Plasma Irregularities	93

2.5 Problems	98
References	100
3. Geometrical Optics Expressions	109
3.1 Solutions of the Eikonal Equation	111
3.2 Nominal Ray Paths	112
3.3 The Signal Phase	116
3.4 The Signal Amplitude	118
3.5 The Angle of Arrival	121
3.6 Validity Conditions	123
3.6.1 The Smooth-medium Condition	124
3.6.2 The Caustic Condition	126
3.6.3 The Diffraction Condition	130
3.7 Problems	133
References	134
4. The Single-path Phase Variance	136
4.1 Terrestrial Links	138
4.1.1 Microwave Phase Measurements	138
4.1.2 Optical Phase Measurements	140
4.1.3 A Basic Expression for the Phase Variance	141
4.1.4 Frequency Scaling	143
4.1.5 Phase-variance Estimates	144
4.1.6 Anisotropic Media and Distance Scaling	147
4.1.7 Phase Trends and the Sample-length Effect	151
4.1.8 Receiver-aperture Averaging	156
4.2 Satellite Signals	160
4.2.1 GPS Range Errors	162
4.2.2 The Ionospheric Influence	170
4.3 Problems	175
References	175
5. The Phase Structure Function	179
5.1 Terrestrial Links	181
5.1.1 Spherical Waves on Horizontal Paths	181
5.1.2 Plane Waves and Collimated Beams	191
5.1.3 The Effect of Atmospheric Anisotropy	197
5.1.4 Beam Waves on Horizontal Paths	200
5.2 Microwave Interferometry	201
5.2.1 $\mathcal{D}_\varphi(\rho)$ for Atmospheric Transmission	204
5.2.2 Separation Scaling for the 2/3 Law	210
5.2.3 The Influence of the Sample Length	213
5.2.4 Microwave-interferometer Measurements	219
5.3 Optical Interferometry	226
5.3.1 Optical Interferometer Installations	228

5.3.2	Limitations on the Accuracy of Optical Interferometers	229
5.4	Problems	234
	References	235
6.	The Temporal Variation of Phase	240
6.1	Atmospheric Variability	240
6.1.1	Atmospheric Wind Fields	241
6.1.2	Taylor's Frozen-random-medium Hypothesis	242
6.1.3	The Locally Frozen Random-medium Approximation	246
6.1.4	More General Descriptions	249
6.2	The Single-path Variability of Phase	250
6.2.1	Autocorrelation of Phase	251
6.2.2	The Temporal Structure Function	256
6.2.3	The Phase Power Spectrum	257
6.2.4	Wind-speed Variations	266
6.2.5	The Influence of Phase Trends	272
6.2.6	The Allan Variance	273
6.3	The Phase Difference for Spherical Waves	274
6.3.1	The Autocorrelation of the Phase Difference	275
6.3.2	The Power Spectrum of the Phase Difference	280
6.4	The Phase Difference for Plane Waves	284
6.4.1	The Autocorrelation of the Phase Difference	284
6.4.2	Phase-difference Power Spectra	286
6.5	Astronomical Interferometry	287
6.5.1	The Time-shifted Phase Structure Function	288
6.5.2	The Autocorrelation of the Phase Difference	290
6.5.3	The Allan Variance for Interferometric Data	290
6.5.4	The Frequency Stability of Arriving Signals	296
6.5.5	Interferometric Power-spectrum Measurements	298
6.6	Problems	308
	References	312
7.	Angle-of-arrival Fluctuations	317
7.1	Measurement Considerations	318
7.1.1	Interferometers	319
7.1.2	Centroid Trackers	321
7.2	Terrestrial Links	322
7.2.1	Plane Waves	322
7.2.2	Spherical Waves	323
7.2.3	Aperture Averaging	324
7.2.4	Beam Waves	328
7.3	Optical Astronomical Signals	333
7.3.1	Angular Position Errors	334
7.3.2	The Spatial Correlation of Angular Errors	338

7.3.3 The Angular-error Correlation for Adjacent Stars	344
7.3.4 Angular-error Averaging by Extended Sources	346
7.3.5 The Influence of Anisotropy	349
7.4 Microwave Tracking of Satellites	352
7.5 Radio Astronomy	356
7.5.1 Ionospheric Influences	357
7.5.2 Tropospheric Influences	362
7.6 Problems	363
References	365
8. Phase Distributions	370
8.1 The Single-path Phase Distribution	370
8.1.1 $\Delta\varepsilon$ Gaussian	371
8.1.2 $\Delta\varepsilon$ Non-Gaussian	371
8.1.3 The Effect of Phase Trends	372
8.1.4 Experimental Results	374
8.2 The Phase Difference Distribution	376
8.2.1 The Predicted Distribution	376
8.2.2 Experimental Confirmations	377
8.3 The Angle-of-arrival Distribution	379
8.4 Temporal Distributions	381
8.5 Problem	382
References	382
9. Field-strength Moments	384
9.1 The Average Field Strength	384
9.2 The Mutual Coherence Function	386
9.3 Frequency Coherence	387
9.4 Shortcomings	388
9.5 Problems	389
References	390
<i>Appendix A Glossary of Symbols</i>	<i>391</i>
<i>Appendix B Integrals of Elementary Functions</i>	<i>397</i>
<i>Appendix C Integrals of Gaussian Functions</i>	<i>401</i>
<i>Appendix D Bessel Functions</i>	<i>403</i>
<i>Appendix E Probability Distributions</i>	<i>414</i>
<i>Appendix F Delta Functions</i>	<i>420</i>
<i>Appendix G Kummer Functions</i>	<i>426</i>
<i>Appendix H Hypergeometric Functions</i>	<i>429</i>
<i>Appendix I Aperture Averaging</i>	<i>432</i>
<i>Appendix J Vector Relations</i>	<i>435</i>
<i>Appendix K The Gamma Function</i>	<i>437</i>
<i>Author Index</i>	<i>441</i>
<i>Subject Index</i>	<i>447</i>

1

Introduction

The laws of geometrical optics were known from experiments long before the electromagnetic theory of light was established [1]. Today we recognize that they constitute an approximate solution for Maxwell's field equations. This solution describes the propagation of light and radio waves in media that change gradually with position [2]. The wavelength is taken to be zero in this approximation and diffraction effects are completely ignored. The field is represented by signals that travel along ray paths connecting the transmitter and receiver. In most applications these rays can be approximated by straight lines. These trajectories are uniquely determined by the dielectric constant of the medium and by the antenna pattern of the transmitter. In this approach energy flows along these ray paths and the signal acts locally like a plane wave. Geometrical optics provides a convenient description for a wide class of propagation problems when certain conditions are met.

The assumption that the medium changes gradually means that geometrical optics cannot describe the scattering by objects of dimensions comparable to a wavelength. Similarly, it cannot describe the boundary region of the shadows cast by sharp edges. A further condition is that rays launched by the transmitter must not converge too sharply – as they do for focused beams. These conditions must be refined when ray theory is used to describe propagation in random media.

Geometrical optics is widely used to describe electromagnetic propagation in the nominal atmosphere of the earth, other planets and the interstellar medium. Refractive bending of starlight and microwave signals in the troposphere is accurately described by this approximation. Standard atmospheric-profile models are used to calculate ray paths, radio horizons and angles of arrival for various elevation angles and surface conditions [3]. Ray theory is also the primary tool for describing the reflection of radio signals in the ionosphere [4]. The maximum usable frequency can be estimated

for shortwave broadcast and communication services if the electron-density profile of the ionosphere is known from vertical sounding measurements or modeling. The same techniques are used to describe the transmission of acoustic waves in the ocean.

It was initially thought that geometrical optics would provide a valid description for propagation through random media and early studies all relied on this approach [5][6][7][8]. The concept assumed that the signal fluctuations are induced by small dielectric variations located close to the nominal ray trajectory. It was hoped that perturbation solutions of the ray equations would yield valid expressions for phase and amplitude variations. Only the first half of that expectation was realized.

Geometrical optics provides a good description for the phase fluctuations imposed by random media. These are caused by the random *speeding up and slowing down* of the signal as it travels along the nominal ray trajectory. Phase fluctuations computed in this way agree with experiment, even when the path is long and the fluctuations are large. For line-of-sight propagation the predicted phase variance is proportional to the path length and the first moment of the spectrum of turbulent irregularities. This means that phase fluctuations depend primarily on the largest eddies and diffraction effects can be ignored.

Geometrical optics also describes angle-of-arrival fluctuations over a wide range of propagation conditions. Angular errors at the receiver are the result of many small *random refractive bendings* along the ray path. This sets the threshold for astronomical seeing with ground-based telescopes. The angular variance is proportional to distance traveled and to the third moment of the spectrum. Angular errors depend primarily on small eddies. As a practical matter, aperture smoothing suppresses the contributions of eddies smaller than the receiver and such measurements depend primarily on the inertial range of the turbulent spectrum. Again, diffraction effects are relatively unimportant.

By contrast, this method cannot describe amplitude and intensity fluctuations in most situations of practical interest. These scintillations are due to the random *bunching and diverging* of energy-bearing rays in this approximation. The resulting expression for the logarithmic variance of the amplitude is proportional to the third power of distance and the fifth moment of the spectrum. Intensity scintillation therefore depends primarily on the smallest eddies for which diffraction effects play a dominant role. To use this approximation the influential eddies must be larger than the Fresnel length. That condition is seldom met and one cannot use this method to define scintillation levels – unless large receivers and/or transmitters are

employed. The geometrical optics description of amplitude fluctuations is primarily of historical interest and one is referred to standard texts for expressions for the variance and correlation [9][10]. Amplitude and intensity fluctuations will be analyzed with diffraction theory in the next volume.

The goal of the second chapter is to describe random media. In the following chapter we adapt geometrical optics to describe propagation through random media and to establish the validity conditions for its application. The single-path phase variance is estimated in Chapter 4. In the following chapter we calculate the phase structure function as a function of the separation between receivers and compare it with results from phase-difference experiments. The temporal correlation of phase and the corresponding power spectrum are addressed in Chapter 6. In the next chapter we describe the angle-of-arrival errors induced by a random medium. We show that the random phase and phase difference are distributed as Gaussian random variables in Chapter 8. Moments of the electric field strength calculated with geometrical optics are presented in the last chapter. Problems are included at the end of each chapter to develop additional insights and to explore related topics. Helpful mathematical relations are summarized in the appendices.

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