

Cyclical quantum memory for photonic qubits

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We have performed a proof-of-principle experiment in which qubits encoded in the polarization states of single photons from a parametric down-conversion source were coherently stored and read out from a quantum memory device. The memory device utilized a simple free-space storage loop, providing a cyclical readout that could be synchronized with the cycle time of a quantum computer. The coherence of the photonic qubits was maintained during switching operations by using a high-speed polarizing Sagnac interferometer switch.

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One of the most attractive features of an all-optical approach to quantum computing is that photons can serve as ideal carriers of quantum information in a modular system connecting various quantum logic gates and memory devices. However, the implementation of the memory devices and logic gates is difficult in an optical approach because photons are relatively difficult to store, and nonlinear interactions between single photons are typically very weak. Although recent developments in linear optics quantum computing [1,2] have shown that logic gates can be operated [3] without direct nonlinear interactions, the implementation of a practical quantum memory for photons remains a challenging problem. In this paper we report on a proof-of-principle experimental demonstration of a such a quantum memory device.

Earlier suggestions for a quantum memory for photons have involved storing the quantum states in high- Q cavities [4] or reversibly transferring them to collective atomic excitations (see, for example, Refs. [5,6]). In contrast, the quantum memory demonstrated here is based on the storage of single photons in a simple free-space optical loop [7]. The photons stored in this loop can be switched out after any number of round trips, providing a cyclical quantum memory (CQM) that could be synchronized with the cycle time of an optical quantum computer.

The CQM presented here is an extension of our earlier work on a source of single photons on pseudodemand, which was realized by using straightforward polarization-based electro-optic switching techniques to release single photons from a storage loop at a desired time [8]. The key requirement in converting that system into the present cyclical quantum memory device was the development of interferometric-based switching techniques that work equally well for any polarization state, and are capable of maintaining the coherence of the polarization-encoded single-photon qubits. As will be described below, this was accomplished by using a high-speed electro-optic device to apply controlled π -phase shifts in a balanced polarizing Sagnac interferometer. During each passage through the interferometric switch, the output port taken by the photon could be controlled by the π -phase shifts, thereby sending the photon back into the storage loop for another cycle, or releasing it from the memory device.

A schematic illustrating the basic features of the CQM is shown in Fig. 1. The polarizing Sagnac interferometer switch

is formed by mirrors m_a and m_b , and a polarizing beam splitter (PBS) that reflects vertical polarizations and transmits horizontal polarizations. The electro-optic device inside the interferometer is a Pockels cell that is configured in such a way that when it is turned “on” it will rotate horizontal polarizations into vertical, and vice versa ($|H\rangle \leftrightarrow |V\rangle$), and when it is turned “off” it will do nothing. The storage line is formed by the upper port of the PBS and mirror m_c .

The logical values 0 and 1 are represented by the horizontal and vertical polarization states of a single photon, so that an input qubit has the form $|\psi\rangle_{in} = \alpha|H\rangle + \beta|V\rangle$, where α and β are arbitrary coefficients. A qubit enters the CQM device from the right, and much of the operation of the device can be understood by first considering the case where the Pockels cell is never turned on. In this case, the vertical component of the incident qubit travels clockwise through the polarizing Sagnac and is reflected up into the storage line, while the horizontal component travels counterclockwise and is transmitted up into the storage line. Upon reflection from mirror m_c , the process essentially runs in reverse, providing an output state $|\psi\rangle_{out}$ after one cycle of the quantum memory.

If there were no losses and no polarization-dependent phase shifts, the output state would emerge in the same coherent superposition state as the input, $|\psi\rangle_{out} = |\psi\rangle_{in}$. Al-

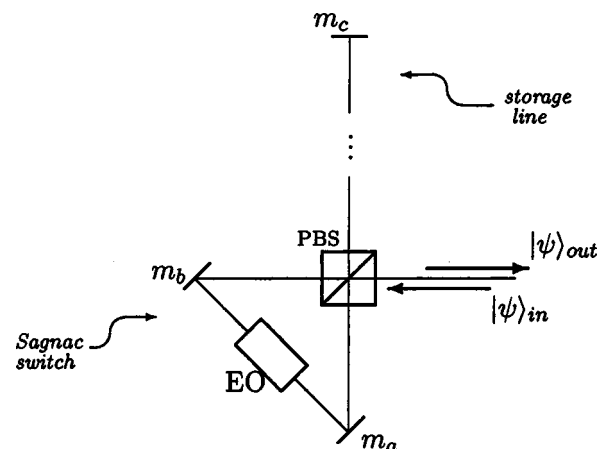


FIG. 1. A schematic illustrating the basic features of the CQM, which utilizes a high-speed electro-optic polarizing Sagnac interferometer switch to maintain the coherence of stored polarization-encoded single-photon qubits.

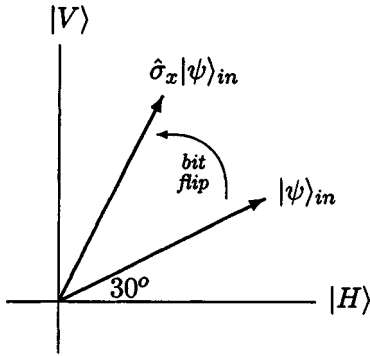


FIG. 2. A graphical representation of the predicted output states of the CQM for an arbitrarily chosen state of the input qubit, $|\psi\rangle_{in} = \sqrt{3}/2|H\rangle + \frac{1}{2}|V\rangle$, which corresponds to a linear polarization state at 30° . The bit-flipped value corresponds to a linear polarization state at 60° .

though there were, of course, losses and small birefringent phase shifts in our experiment, the practical benefit of the polarizing Sagnac interferometer is that the counterpropagating horizontal and vertical components experience the same physical path, essentially eliminating the much larger thermally or vibrationally induced phase shifts that would otherwise ruin the coherence of the qubit in, for example, a comparable Mach-Zehnder interferometer.

In order for the CQM to store the qubit for more than one cycle, the Pockels cell must be quickly turned on while the photon is propagating in the storage line for the first time. Upon subsequent passes through the Sagnac interferometer, the counterpropagating horizontal and vertical components of the qubit are therefore repeatedly flipped ($|H\rangle \leftrightarrow |V\rangle$), and the photon remains trapped in the device as long as the Pockels cell is left on. When the Pockels is finally turned off, it can be seen that the final values of the counterpropagating components are those required to release the photon from the device.

Consequently, one of the interesting features of the CQM is that qubits stored for an even number of cycles emerge as the bit-flipped value of input qubit, $|\psi\rangle_{even} = \hat{\sigma}_x |\psi\rangle_{in} = \alpha|V\rangle + \beta|H\rangle$, while qubits released after an odd number of cycles are not bit flipped, $|\psi\rangle_{odd} = |\psi\rangle_{in}$. For quantum computing applications, the feed-forward control techniques that we have previously demonstrated [9] could be used to reflip qubit readout after even numbers of cycles in the CQM; alternatively, the CQM round-trip time could be designed to be half the cycle time of the computer.

For all of the data that will be presented in this paper, the qubits were prepared in the arbitrarily chosen superposition state

$$|\psi\rangle_{in} = \frac{\sqrt{3}}{2}|H\rangle + \frac{1}{2}|V\rangle, \quad (1)$$

which corresponds to a linear polarization state at 30° . A graphical representation of the expected output qubits after both even and odd numbers of cycles is shown in Fig. 2.

A more important consequence of the repeated flipping of the polarization components is that certain types of errors

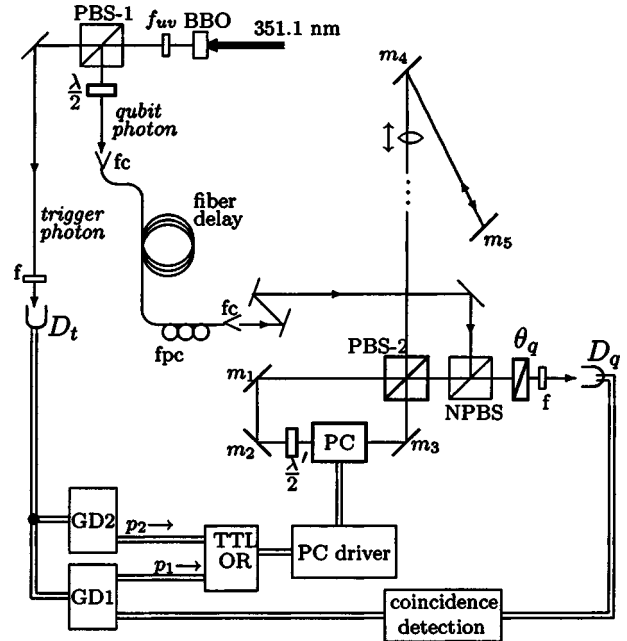


FIG. 3. A schematic of the experimental setup used for a laboratory demonstration of the CQM. Details and symbols are described in the text.

automatically correct themselves. For example, unwanted polarization-dependent phase shifts imparted in the storage line affect each of the two components of the original qubit an equal number of times for those qubits switched out after an even number of round trips. As a result, the accumulated relative phase shift becomes an overall phase shift that simply factors out of the final state. Similarly, the net relative phase-shift error of this kind for qubits switched out after an odd number n of cycles is only that due to the final round trip, and not the accumulation of the phase errors due to the previous $n - 1$ round trips.

A schematic representation of the actual experiment, which utilized true heralded single photons from a parametric down-conversion source [10], is shown in Fig. 3. As shown in the upper part of Fig. 3, our down-conversion source consisted of a 1-mm-thick beta barium borate (BBO) crystal pumped by roughly 30 mW of the 351.1-nm line of a continuous-wave argon-ion laser. The crystal was cut for type-II degenerate phase matching and produced pairs of colinearly propagating, but orthogonally polarized photons at 702.2 nm [11]. The photons of a given pair were separated by a polarizing beam splitter PBS-1. The detection of the “trigger photon” by detector D_t signalled the presence of the “qubit photon,” and provided a relative start time for the cyclical device.

The polarizing Sagnac interferometer switch, which can be seen in roughly the center of Fig. 3, was formed by the polarizing beam splitter PBS-2, and mirrors m_1 through m_3 . The Pockels Cell (PC) was placed inside the Sagnac interferometer with its fast axis rotated by 45° from the vertical direction. An additional half-wave plate (labeled $\lambda'/2$) was inserted next to the PC; this half-wave plate was usually oriented so that it had no effect, but it could be rotated as needed for various diagnostic tests during initial alignment.

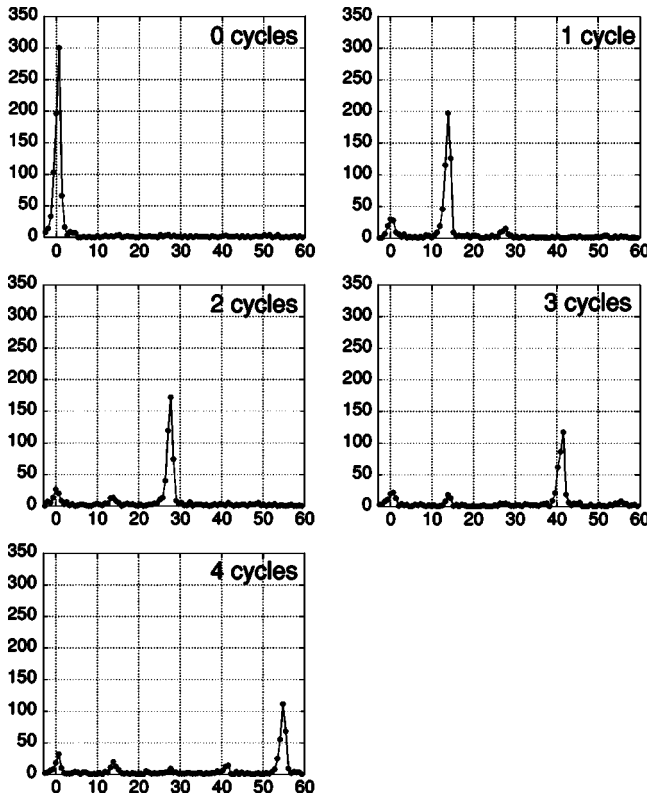


FIG. 4. A demonstration of qubit storage and active switch out after a chosen number of cycles in the CQM. Each of the plots shows the number of coincidence counts per 600 sec (vertical axes) as a function of the time of arrival in nanoseconds (horizontal axes) of the qubit photon at detector D_q relative to the detection of the trigger photon at detector D_t .

The storage line was formed by the upper port of PBS-2 and mirrors m_4 and m_5 (the storage line was folded due to space constraints). The length of the storage line was roughly 3.5 m which, when combined with the 0.5 m length of the Sagnac interferometer, gave a total round-trip time of roughly 13.3 ns, which was longer than the 10 ns rise time of the Pockels cell, as required [8]. In order to minimize beam divergence and maximize the possible storage time (number of cycles) of the CQM, a 1 m focal length lens was placed in the storage line, and longitudinally adjusted to form a standard $2f$ Gaussian transmission line.

The qubit state preparation was implemented by using a half-wave plate (labeled $\lambda/2$) to rotate the vertical polarization of the qubit photon to any desired linear polarization state. The state of the output qubit was measured using a polarization analyzer (θ_q) and another single-photon detector D_q . Background noise was reduced to a negligible level by using 10-nm-bandwidth filters f centered at 700 nm in front of the trigger and qubit photon detectors.

In order to allow for the time required to produce and process the classical detection signal of the trigger photon, the qubit photon was delayed by a 120-m fiber-optic delay line before being sent into the CQM [8]. A standard fiber polarization controller was used to negate the effects of birefringence in the fiber, as well as to precompensate for small birefringent phase shifts of three additional steering mirrors

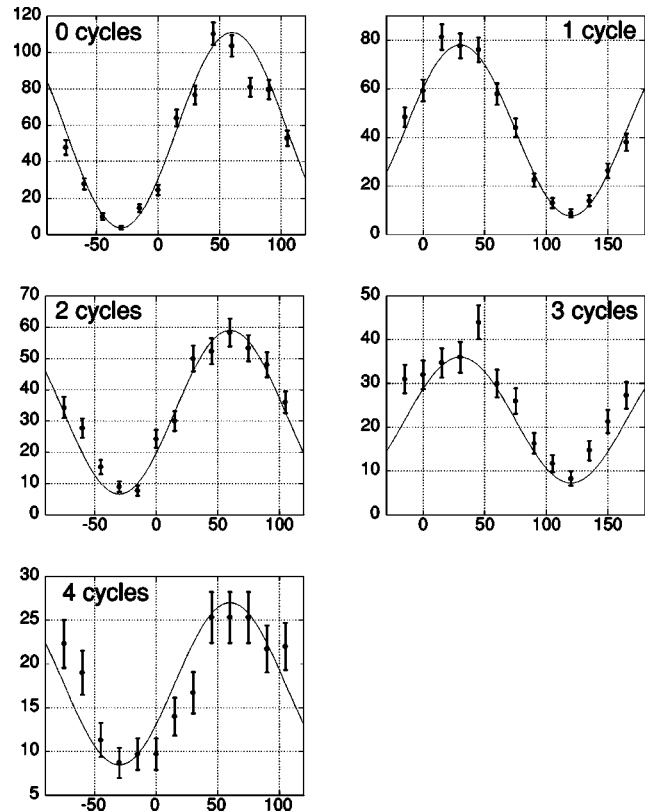


FIG. 5. Test of the coherence of the CQM device. The data shows a plot of the number of coincidence counts per 120 sec (vertical axes) as a function of the qubit polarization analyzer θ_q setting in degrees (horizontal axes) for each of the five peaks shown in Fig. 4. The solid lines (cosine-squared curves centered at the expected output angle) are simply meant as guides to the eye. The input qubits were linearly polarized at 30° , and the expected bit flipping of those qubits stored for an even number of cycles is clearly seen.

(not labeled) and a 50-50 nonpolarizing beam splitter that was used to couple the qubits into the CQM input channel.

The electronics used for the real-time active switching, which are seen in the lower part of Fig. 3, are described in detail in Ref. [8]. Briefly, the “on” to “off” transitions of the Pockels Cell were driven by the front and back edges of two different pulses p_1 and p_2 [from delay generators (GD1 and GD2)], which allowed the use of transistor-transistor logic pulses whose width (100 ns) was greater than the cycle time.

The accumulation of data involved the use of conventional coincidence counting techniques to record the time of arrival of the qubit photon at detector D_q relative to the arrival time of the trigger photon at detector D_t . Accumulated histograms of data would therefore show various peaks separated by 13.3 ns time intervals, corresponding to different numbers of round trips through the CQM.

The data shown in Fig. 4 demonstrates the ability to actively switch out the qubit after a chosen number of cycles through the CQM. For the data shown in Fig. 4, the qubit polarization analyzer θ_q was removed in order to clearly demonstrate the switching performance and assess any losses in the CQM. The area under the peak of interest in each

successive plot is seen to decrease in approximate agreement with the 19% loss per cycle, which was measured in auxiliary experiments [12]. Of this 19%, we estimate that roughly 15% was due to reflection and transmission losses of the various optical components, with the remaining 4% being due to imperfect focussing in the $2f$ Gaussian transmission line. Small switching errors [8] that resulted in undesired noise peaks can also be seen in Fig. 4.

A test of the key feature of the CQM, the ability to maintain the coherence of the stored qubits, is summarized in Fig. 5. For the data shown in Fig. 5, the qubit polarization analyzer θ_q was used to measure the polarization states of the stored qubits and compare them with the predicted output states shown in Fig. 2. For qubits stored for an odd number of cycles, the output states in Fig. 5 are seen to be in good agreement with the linear input polarization state of 30° , while for even number cycles the expected (bit-flipped) linear polarization output state at 60° is evident.

For each of the successive plots in Fig. 5 the maximum counting rate and the quality of the output state is seen to decrease for qubits stored for longer times, as might have been expected. We believe the degradation of the qubit quality was primarily due to small misalignments of the mirrors, which produce spatial offsets that accumulate with each round trip and can reduce the spatial overlap of the horizon-

tal and vertical components in the output, thereby reducing the interference conditions required to maintain the coherence of the qubit. We expect to be able to greatly reduce these errors by using fiber-optic components in future implementations of the CQM.

In conclusion, we have performed a proof-of-principle demonstration of a new type of all-optical cyclical quantum memory (CQM) device based on the storage of photonic qubits in a simple free-space optical loop. The ability to maintain the coherence of the qubits was accomplished here by the application of electro-optic-based controlled π -phase shifts in a balanced polarizing Sagnac interferometer switch [13]. An optical approach to quantum computing will most likely involve the use of trains of intense laser pulses, such as those from mode-locked Ti-sapphire lasers. Because these pulse trains provide a natural clock cycle, a cyclical quantum memory device of the kind presented here should be ideally suited for an optical approach to quantum computing, and these initial experiments may provide a first step in that direction.

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