URSI AP-RASC, Sydney, Australia, 17 – 22 August 2025

Radio Wave Dynamics in Saturn's Magnetosphere: Linking SKR, Narrowband Emissions, and Magnetospheric Processes

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Abstract

Radio waves, particularly Saturn Kilometric Radiation (SKR) and narrowband (NB) emissions, serve as critical diagnostics of energy transport and magnetosphere-ionosphere coupling at Saturn. Using multi-instrument Cassini observations, we establish a unified framework linking these wave phenomena to large-scale magnetospheric reconfigurations. SKR enhancements are closely tied to recurrent magnetic dipolarization events, which release stored magnetotail energy through auroral electron precipitation and excitation of the electron cyclotron maser instability. Concurrently, ~20 kHz NB emissions arise from electrostatic-to-electromagnetic wave conversion at sharp plasma density gradients near Saturn's inner magnetosphere. Both emissions exhibit strong rotational modulation (~11 hours), governed by Saturn's global current systems and periodic Energetic Neutral Atoms (ENA) emissions. The strong correlation and periodicity observed over five consecutive Saturn rotation periods among SKR, NB, and energetic particle injections indicate a sequential energy transfer process from the magnetotail to the ionosphere. This study underscores radio radiation waves as active participants in magnetospheric dynamics, offering insights applicable to rapidly rotating giant planetary systems.

1. Introduction

Radio waves are central to magnetospheric physics, enabling particle acceleration, angular momentum transport, and energy dissipation across wide ranges of radial distance and latitude. At Saturn, two particularly prominent wave phenomena are Saturn Kilometric Radiation (SKR) and narrowband (NB) radio emissions. SKR arises primarily from the electron cyclotron maser instability near the auroral regions [1, 2], whereas 20 kHz NB emissions are associated with regions of sharply changing plasma density in the inner to middle magnetosphere [3, 4]. Although wave activity (e.g., SKR) at Saturn is often modulated by the solar wind, the planet's magnetospheric configuration is primarily governed by strong internal drivers — Saturn's ~10.7-hour rotation and plasma mass loading from Enceladus [5, 6]. These internal processes generate the rotating partial ring current (PRC) and cause massive periodic/quasi-periodic phenomena in the magnetosphere, such as corotating ENA emissions, recurrent magnetic dipolarizations, and periodic radio emission intensifications [7-9].

A key signature of reconfiguration in Saturn's magnetotail is magnetic dipolarization, characterized by an increase in the north-south magnetic field component. This reconfiguration is linked to the redirection of equatorial currents and is often followed by particle acceleration along newly dipolarized field lines [10, 11]. Associated ENA emissions recorded by Cassini's Ion and Neutral Camera (INCA) reveal the dynamical coupling between the energetic ion population and the partial ring current, providing insights into the global plasma environment where SKR and NB emissions originate. As SKR and NB waves also show quasi-periodic enhancements following these current reorganizations, a potential unifying mechanism emerges whereby radio emissions, energetic particle injections, and large-scale current systems are intimately interwoven.

By analyzing multi-instrument Cassini observations, this study investigates the temporal and spatial characteristics of SKR and NB emissions, aiming to construct a unified framework for their generation and relationship with magnetospheric processes (ENA and magnetic dipolarization) within Saturn's magnetosphere. This work not only advances our understanding of wave-driven processes at Saturn but also provides broader insights into planetary magnetospheres across the Solar System.

2. Observations of SKR, NB Emission and ENA Enhancements

Figure 1 shows the Cassini spacecraft's trajectory in KSM coordinates from 17 May to 3 June 2009. During this interval, Cassini traversed the dayside magnetosphere and moved to higher latitudes near noon local time, in which red parts are our interested intervals May 27th to May 30th shown in Figure 2-4. Figure 2 presents the Cassini Radio and Plasma Wave Science (RPWS) spectrogram for 27 May 00:00 to 29 May 10:00, displaying wave intensity (in dB above background) as a function of frequency and time. Saturn Kilometric Radiation (SKR) appears at frequencies extending from ~100 kHz down to ~10 kHz (a low-frequency extension) and exhibits discrete bursts around every 11 hours, in phase with Saturn's rotation. These SKR intensifications likely indicate stronger auroral electron acceleration associated with enhanced field-aligned currents [2, 12].

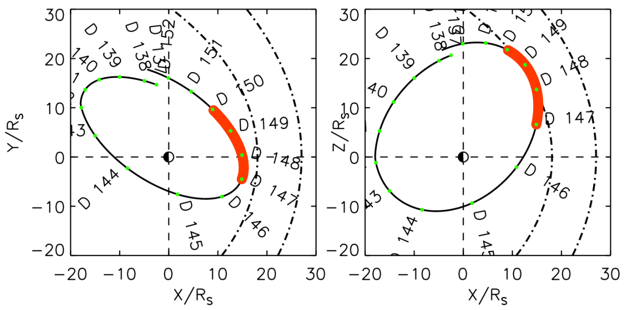

Figure 1. Trajectory of Cassini from May 17 to June 3, 2009 (Rev 111, day 137 to 150) in Kronocentric Solar Magnetospheric (KSM) coordinate. (a) The X-Y view; (b) The X-Z view. Event observation periods are highlighted in red (May 27 to May 30, 2009).

Enhanced 20 kHz NB emissions, pointed by red arrows, were observed following each SKR intensification. Each 20 kHz NB enhancement occurs a few hours after an SKR outburst. Previous work has shown that 20 kHz NB emissions can originate from linear or nonlinear mode conversion of electrostatic upper-hybrid waves at steep plasma-density gradients, particularly along the inner plasma torus at L~ 4 to 7 [4]. The close temporal relationship between SKR and NB waves suggests a common driver — recurrent reconfigurations of Saturn's magnetosphere that modulate auroral acceleration as well as density gradients in the inner magnetosphere.

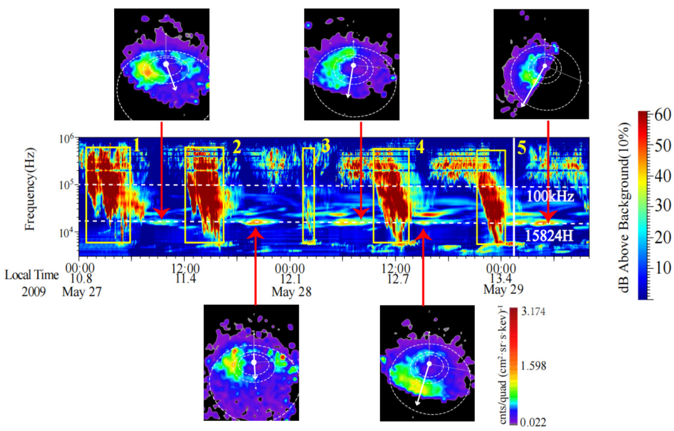

Figure 2. A Evidence of the close relationship among the brightened ENA emissions, the enhanced 20kHz signals and SKR signals from May 27th 00:00 to May 29th 10:00, 2009. The center panel shows the Cassini RPWS electric power, where the yellow rectangle indicates the SKR signal that extends to low frequencies. The enhanced 20 kHz NB signal appears after each SKR enhancement. The top and bottom panels show the ENA emission peaks captured during the 20 kHz NB signals and aligned to the center panel by the red arrows according to the time of occurrence. The white dotted lines in the center panel represents a cut of the wave intensity at 100 kHz (represents SKR low frequency extension) 15824 Hz (represent 20 kHz NB), corresponding to Figure 4. The White arrows in ENA images point to the Sun.

In addition to the RPWS measurements, Figure 2 includes insets of ENA images acquired by the INCA instrument of Cassini. The red arrows point to the captured time of ENA. Each ENA snapshot overlaps in time with the wave data, illustrating that ENA enhancements closely follow strong SKR bursts and coincide with 20 kHz NB emissions. These enhancements typically appear in the pre-dawn to dawn sector, at radial distances of 6–10 R$_s$. Such ENA brightening is commonly interpreted as evidence of rotating hot-plasma clouds or PRC structures. As Saturn's rapid rotation sweeps these hot-ion regions around the planet, fresh energetic-ion injections and give rise to repeated ENA flares [7, 8].

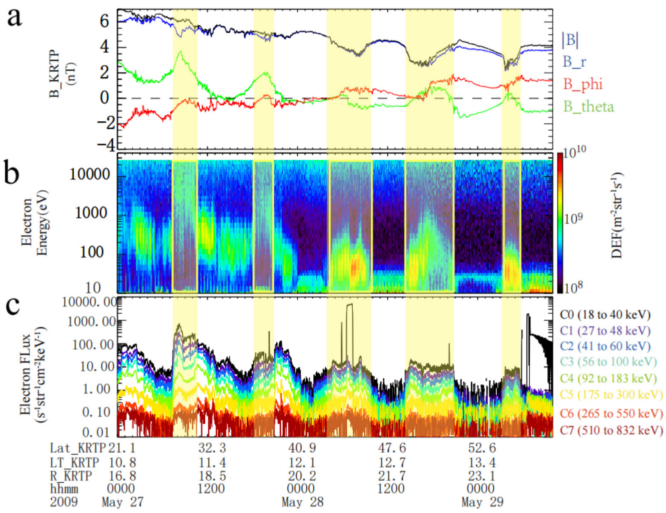

Figure 3. Recurrent magnetic signals from May 27th 00:00 to May 29th 10:00, 2009. (a) Total magnetic field magnitude and three magnetic field components. (b) Energy spectrogram of omnidirectional electron flux from CAPS-ELS. (c) Differential flux of energetic electrons from MIMI-LEMMS. The yellow shadings are regions where Cassini detected recurrent magnetic signals.

3. Observations of Magnetic Dipolarization and Rotational Modulation

Figure 3 displays the in situ measurements of the magnetic field (Cassini-MAG) and electron flux (CAPS/ELS and MIMI-LEMMS) over the same 27–29 May interval. The top panel shows the total magnetic-field strength and three components in Kronocentric spherical coordinates (KRTP). Over five of Saturn's rotation periods, periodic increases in the B_θ component coincide with enhanced energetic electron fluxes (tens of eV to keV), highlighted by yellow shading. These are interpreted as magnetic dipolarization related signal [10, 11], signifying the release of stored energy and the acceleration of electrons toward the inner magnetosphere.

For the same time interval of Figure 2-3, Figure 4 provides a side-by-side view of the SKR intensity at ~100 kHz, NB amplitude near 20 kHz, and the magnetic field component B_θ. This comparison reveals that major SKR outbursts and NB enhancements track the same rotational timescale as magnetic dipolarization events, although they may exhibit time lags or phase offsets attributable to emission beaming [13] or local plasma conditions. Overall, these observations demonstrate that magnetic dipolarizations, ENA brightening, SKR bursts, and NB emissions constitute different manifestations of the same rotation-driven magnetospheric cycle.

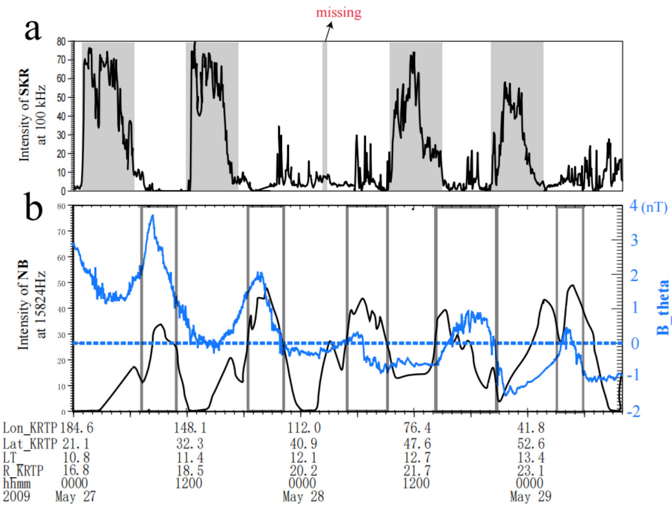

Figure 4. Evidence of the close relationship between the dipolarization signals and the enhanced 20kHz signals. (a) The variation of the intensity of SKR at 100 kHz (other signals at 100 kHz have been filtered) corresponding to the white dash line in the centre of Figure 2. Grey shading indicates SKR events that are significantly enhanced compared to the background. (b) The variation of intensity of NB at 15824 Hz, while the blue curve shows the B_θ component. The rectangles emphasize their correspondence.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, we made a detailed analysis of simultaneous observations of the radio emissions, magnetic field, electrons, ENA emissions using Cassini's multiple datasets. We identified quasi-periodic radio emissions (SKR and 20 kHz NB) and recurrent magnetic field dipolarization structures over the period May 27th 00:00 to May 29th 10:00, 2009, as counterparts of the remotely sensed ENA enhancements. These observations highlight the pivotal role that large-scale current systems and periodic tail reconfigurations play in generating SKR, NB emissions, and ENA enhancements. In this study, we propose that the most plausible explanation for this connection may be a common current system that drives these processes, i.e. an enhanced PRC [7], which can link SKR, NB emissions and recurrent magnetospheric processes (e.g., ENAs and magnetic dipolarizations).

At Saturn, magnetic dipolarization processes typically manifest as sudden increases in the dipolar (i.e., B_θ) field componen, which correspond to the global current diversion and can lead to global auroral enhancement [10]. Furthermore, recurrently enhanced field-aligned electron beams in Saturn's high-latitude auroral regions would trigger quasi-periodic SKR bursts, which are well understood to arise from the electron cyclotron maser instability [1, 2]. The increased B_θ component of the magnetic field in the region outside of the current system, characteristic of the magnetic dipolarization structures, is a manifestation of the enhanced PRC as illustrated in the schematic of Figure 5a Periodicaly flowing PRCs will generate an induced magnetic field could cause the magnetic field within the magnetosphere to become more dipolar every rotation period (~11h). Following the understanding of terrestrial PRC [14], we suggest the Saturnian PRCs are closed with two FAC wedges and an ionospheric electrical current jet (Figure 5b).

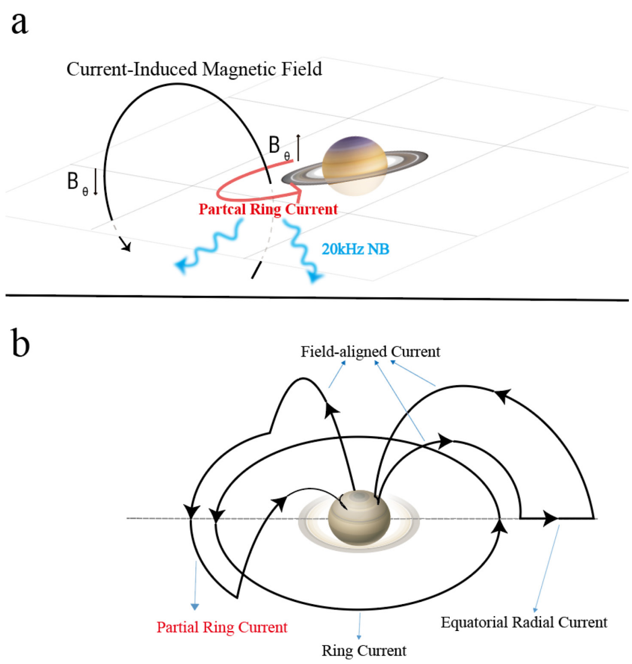

Figure 5. (a) Schematic diagram of the coupling between the inner and mid-outer magnetosphere driven by ENA, which is applicable inside the magnetosphere. (b) A schematic of PRC in the Saturn current system.

Corotating ENA emissions are known to be associated with PRCs (e.g., Krimigis et al., 2007, Sergis et al., 2009). The Type 2 ENA injections may also generate perturbations in the inner magnetosphere (5 - 11 R_s) [15], thus directly affecting the plasma torus edge, which is near the source region of the 20 kHz NB [4]. That is, the steep plasma density gradient required for the generation of NB emisison can be provided by the process associated with ENA injections in the inner magnetosphere.

The main results are summarized as below,

(1) The kilometric radiations at Saturn are linked to magnetic dipolarizations, ENA and aurora, providing new insight to understand their driving mechanisms.
(2) The 20 kHz NB emission is probably driven at the edge of plasma torus that is perturbed by ENA injections in the inner magnetosphere;
(3) Corotating PRC system can potentially explain the quasi-periodic radio emissions, ENA emission and dipolarized changes in the magnetic field structure at Saturn;

5. Acknowledgements

This work was supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China grants 42074211, grant 42074180.

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