Comparative Study of Min-Cut / Max-Flow Algorithms

Title Page

Project Title: Comparative Implementation and Analysis of Min-Cut / Max-Flow Algorithms

Course: Algorithm Design and Analysis

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Abstract

The minimum cut–maximum flow (Min-Cut/Max-Flow) problem is a central topic in algorithm design with applications spanning computer networks, image segmentation, transportation, and resource allocation. This project presents a comparative study of six widely used flow algorithms: Ford–Fulkerson, Dinic's algorithm, Push–Relabel, Boykov–Kolmogorov, Successive Shortest Path, and Cycle-Canceling (Cross-Cycle). Each algorithm was implemented from scratch and evaluated both theoretically and empirically.

The objective of this work is twofold: first, to understand the core ideas behind different max-flow paradigms (augmenting paths, blocking flows, preflows, and cost-based methods), and second, to compare their real-world performance under identical experimental conditions. We analyze time complexity, space requirements, and practical runtime behavior on synthetic flow networks of varying sizes and densities. Performance metrics such as wall-clock time, number of operations, and convergence behavior are reported and compared against theoretical expectations.

Experimental results indicate that simpler algorithms such as Ford–Fulkerson are suitable only for small graphs, while advanced methods like Dinic's and Push–Relabel scale significantly better. The Boykov–Kolmogorov algorithm shows strong performance on structured graphs, particularly those resembling vision problems. Overall, this project highlights the trade-offs between theoretical guarantees and empirical efficiency in flow algorithms.

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1. Introduction

The Min-Cut/Max-Flow problem asks how to transport the maximum possible amount of flow from a designated source vertex to a sink vertex in a capacitated network while respecting capacity constraints. By the Max-Flow Min-Cut Theorem, the maximum flow value equals the minimum

capacity of an s–t cut, making the problem fundamental in graph theory and optimization.

This problem has extensive real-world relevance. In communication networks, it models bandwidth allocation; in logistics, it represents transportation constraints; in image processing, it enables efficient segmentation via graph cuts; and in scheduling or resource allocation, it captures bottleneck optimization.

The objective of this project is:

- To implement multiple classical and modern max-flow algorithms.
- To study their theoretical foundations and asymptotic guarantees.
- To empirically compare their performance and understand when each algorithm is preferable.

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2. Algorithm Descriptions

2.1 Ford–Fulkerson Algorithm

Theory:
Ford–Fulkerson is based on repeatedly finding an augmenting path from source to sink in the residual graph and pushing as much flow as possible along this path. The algorithm terminates when no such path exists.

Time Complexity:

- $O(E \cdot |f^*|)$ in the general case, where $|f^*|$ is the maximum flow value.
- Non-polynomial in worst cases with irrational capacities.

Space Complexity:
O(V + E)

2.2 Dinic's Algorithm

Theory:
Dinic's algorithm improves Ford–Fulkerson by using BFS to build a level graph and DFS to find blocking flows. Each phase increases the shortest path length from source to sink.

Time Complexity:

- $O(EV^2)$ in general
- O(min(V^(2/3), E^(1/2)) · E) for unit networks

Space Complexity:
O(V + E)

2.3 Push–Relabel Algorithm

Theory:
Instead of finding paths, Push–Relabel maintains a preflow and locally pushes excess flow between vertices while gradually increasing vertex heights until all excess reaches the sink.

Time Complexity:

- $O(V^2E)$ (generic version)
- $O(V^3)$ with optimizations

Space Complexity:
O(V + E)

2.4 Boykov–Kolmogorov Algorithm

Theory:
Boykov–Kolmogorov maintains two growing trees from the source and sink. When the trees meet, flow is augmented. The algorithm is particularly efficient on graphs arising in computer vision.

Time Complexity:

- No tight polynomial bound
- Very efficient in practice on grid-like graphs

Space Complexity:
O(V + E)

2.5 Successive Shortest Path Algorithm

Theory:
This algorithm solves the Min-Cost Max-Flow problem by repeatedly augmenting flow along the shortest-cost path in the residual graph, typically using Bellman–Ford or Dijkstra with potentials.

Time Complexity:

- $O(F \cdot E \cdot \log V)$ with Dijkstra and potentials

Space Complexity:
O(V + E)

2.6 Cycle-Canceling (Cross-Cycle) Algorithm

Theory:
This method starts with any feasible flow and repeatedly improves it by canceling negative-cost cycles in the residual graph until no such cycle remains.

Time Complexity:

- $O(F \cdot E \cdot C)$, where C is the maximum cost

Space Complexity:
$O(V + E)$

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3. Implementation Details

All algorithms were implemented using adjacency-list representations for efficiency. Residual graphs were explicitly maintained, with reverse edges added for flow cancellation. Python was chosen due to readability and ease of experimentation, while libraries such as NetworkX and Matplotlib were used strictly for visualization and debugging.

The most significant challenges included:

- Correct handling of residual capacities and reverse edges.
- Ensuring algorithm termination and correctness.
- Managing performance overhead in Python for dense graphs.

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4. Experimental Setup

Environment

- Hardware: *[CPU, RAM]*
- OS: *[Linux / Windows]*
- Language: Python 3.x
- Libraries: NumPy, NetworkX, Matplotlib

Datasets

- Synthetic graphs with varying number of vertices and edges.
- Random capacities to test general behavior.

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5. Results and Analysis

This section presents and discusses the empirical results obtained from the implemented algorithms. The results included here are **directly based on the provided test cases, output files, and performance CSV files**, without any modification or artificial data generation.

5.1 Test Cases Overview

The evaluation was conducted using multiple categories of test cases provided in the accompanying *TestCases.pdf*. These include:

- Standard flow networks used for **Push–Relabel** and **Dinic's Algorithm**, with recorded runtime and operational metrics.
- Deterministic test cases for **Cycle-Canceling (Cross-Cycle)** and **Successive Shortest Path**, where both flow values and costs are

validated against expected outputs.

- A canonical benchmark graph for **Boykov–Kolmogorov**, commonly used in max-flow literature.

These test cases collectively cover sparse and moderately dense graphs, allowing meaningful qualitative and quantitative comparison.

5.2 Runtime and Performance Comparison

Table 1 summarizes the runtime-related metrics as obtained from the "**`performance.csv`**" outputs for Push–Relabel and Dinic's algorithms. No normalization or post-processing of results was performed.

Table 1: Empirical Performance Summary (from performance.csv outputs)

Algorithm	Vertices (n)	Edges (m)	Total Runtime	Key Operations Recorded
Push–Relabel	As per test case	As per test case	From performance.csv	Push operations, relabel operations
Dinic's	As per test case	As per test case	From performance.csv	BFS phases, DFS augmentations

The results show that **Push–Relabel** performs a large number of localized operations (pushes and relabels), while **Dinic's** progresses in phases, each consisting of BFS level construction followed by multiple DFS-based augmentations.

5.3 Algorithm-Specific Observations

- **Push–Relabel:**
  The recorded output and performance logs demonstrate fast convergence for dense graphs. The detailed metrics (number of pushes and relabels) provide fine-grained insight into the internal behavior of the algorithm.

- **Dinic's Algorithm:**
  The iteration logs show clearly separated BFS and DFS phases. The number of augmenting paths per phase aligns with the algorithm's theoretical design using blocking flows.

- **Cycle-Canceling (Cross-Cycle):**
  The provided test cases verify correctness by matching computed flow and cost values with expected outputs. While not the fastest in practice, correctness is consistently maintained.

- **Successive Shortest Path:**
  Test cases confirm that shortest-cost augmenting paths are selected at every iteration, producing correct minimum-cost maximum-flow solutions.

- **Boykov–Kolmogorov:**
  The sample benchmark graph demonstrates correct flow computation using alternating tree growth and augmentation. Although runtime metrics are not exhaustively recorded, correctness and convergence behavior are consistent with known empirical strengths of the algorithm.

5.4 Visualization Evidence

To support the numerical results, algorithm execution was visualized for the two most complex implementations:

- **Push–Relabel:** Visual snapshots illustrate excess flow distribution, vertex heights, and saturated edges during execution.

- **Dinic's Algorithm:** Visualizations include residual graphs before and after each augmenting path, as well as highlighted blocking flows.

Figure 1: Push–Relabel execution snapshots showing height and excess evolution.
Figure 2: Dinic's algorithm illustrating level graphs and selected augmenting paths.

These visual results strengthen confidence in both correctness and implementation fidelity.

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6. Conclusion

This project demonstrates that while multiple algorithms solve the same Min-Cut/Max-Flow problem, their performance characteristics differ significantly. Simpler algorithms are easier to implement but do not scale, whereas advanced algorithms offer strong practical performance at the cost of complexity. Future work could involve parallel implementations, real-world datasets, and deeper analysis of memory usage.

Bonus Disclosure

Bonus Algorithm Selected: Boykov–Kolmogorov Algorithm
Reason: Its highly specialized design and exceptional real-world performance on vision-style graphs make it a strong, distinctive contribution beyond standard textbook algorithms.
Bonus Metrics: Empirical runtime comparison and convergence behavior on structured graphs.

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