

Lecture 21: Max-Flow II

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November 11, 2025
601.433/633 Introduction to Algorithms
Slides by Mike Dinitz

Introduction

Last time:

- ▶ Max-Flow = Min-Cut
- ▶ Can compute max flow and min cut using Ford-Fulkerson: while residual graph has an $s \rightarrow t$ path, push flow along it.
 - ▶ Corollary: if all capacities integers, max-flow is integral
 - ▶ If max-flow has value F , time $O(F(m+n))$ (if all capacities integers)
 - ▶ Exponential time!

Today:

- ▶ Important setting where FF is enough: max bipartite matching
- ▶ Two ways of making FF faster: Edmonds-Karp

Integrality

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Proof.

Induction on iterations of the Ford-Fulkerson algorithm: initially true, stays true \implies true at end. □

Running Time

Theorem

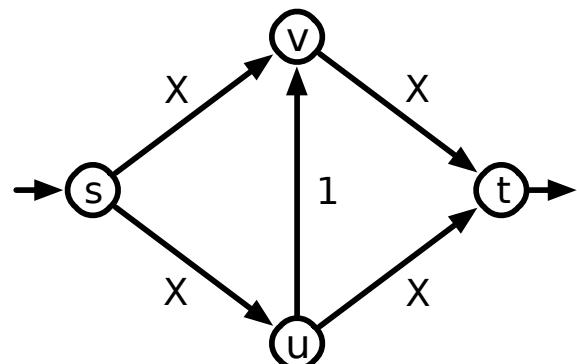
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Finding path takes $O(m+n)$ time, increase flow by at least 1



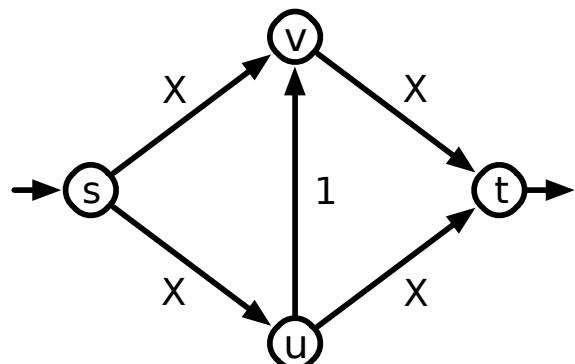
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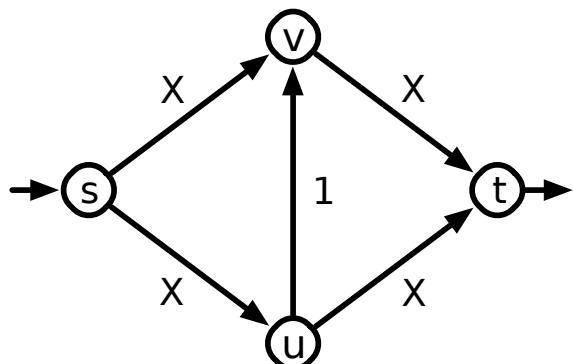
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- ▶ Running time: $\Omega(x)$

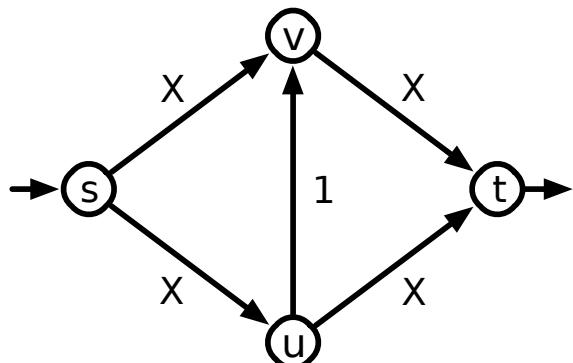
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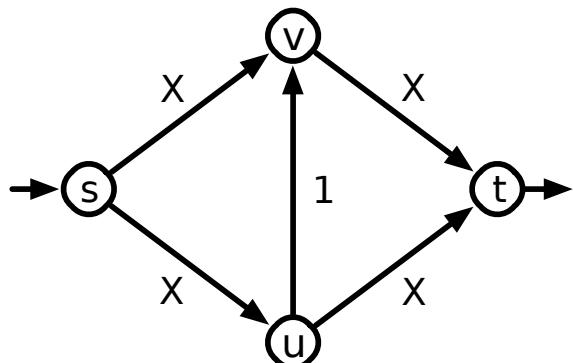
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- ⇒ Exponential time!

Max Bipartite Matching

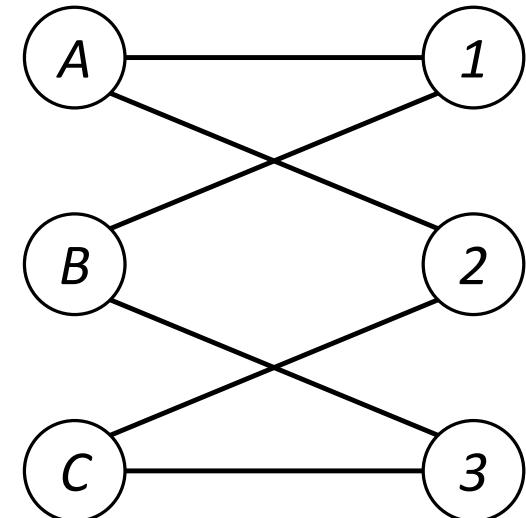
Setup

Definition

A graph $G = (V, E)$ is *bipartite* if V can be partitioned into two parts L, R such that every edge in E has one endpoint in L and one endpoint in R .

Definition

A *matching* is a subset $M \subseteq E$ such that $e \cap e' = \emptyset$ for all $e, e' \in M$ with $e \neq e'$ (no two edges share an endpoint)



Bipartite Maximum Matching: Given bipartite graph $G = (V, E)$, find matching M maximizing $|M|$

- ▶ Extremely important problem, doesn't seem to have much to do with flow!

Algorithm

Give all edges capacity **1**

Direct all edges from **L** to **R**

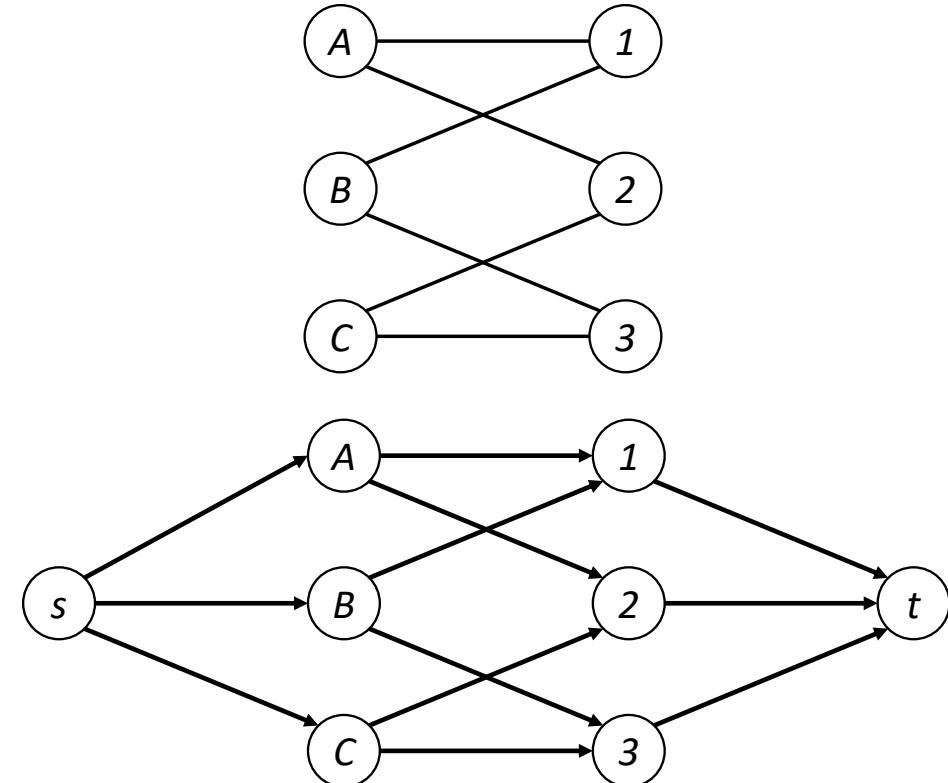
Add source **s** and sink **t**

Add edges of capacity **1** from **s** to **L**

Add edges of capacity **1** from **R** to **t**

Run FF to get flow **f**

Return $M = \{e \in L \times R : f(e) > 0\}$



Correctness

Claim: M is a matching

Correctness

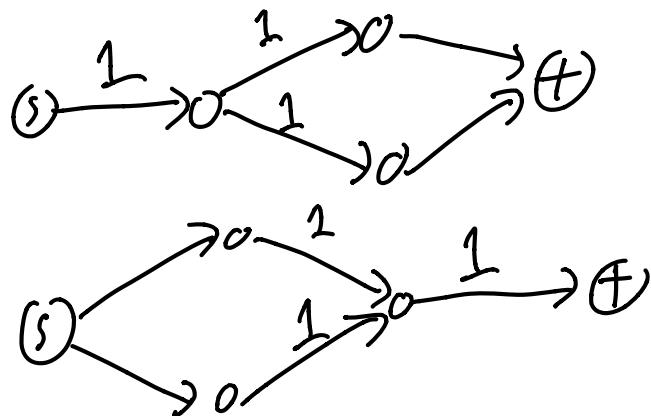
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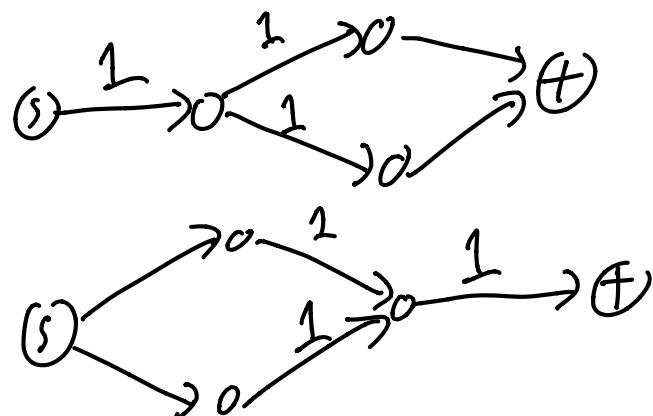


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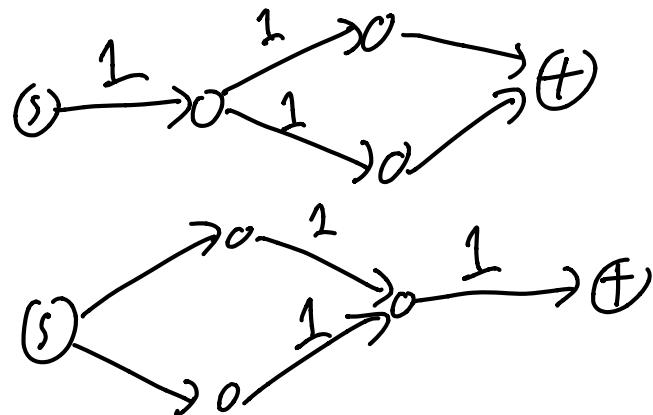
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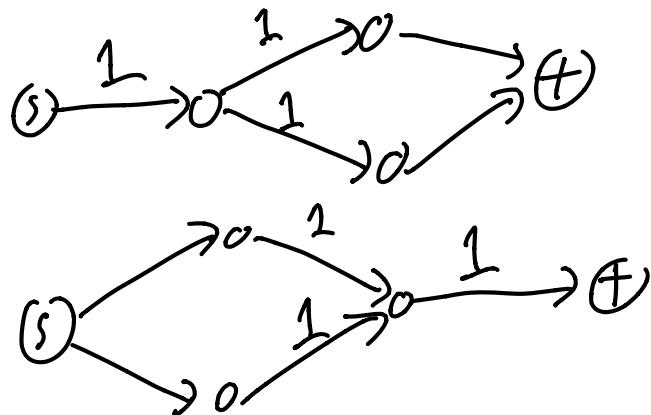
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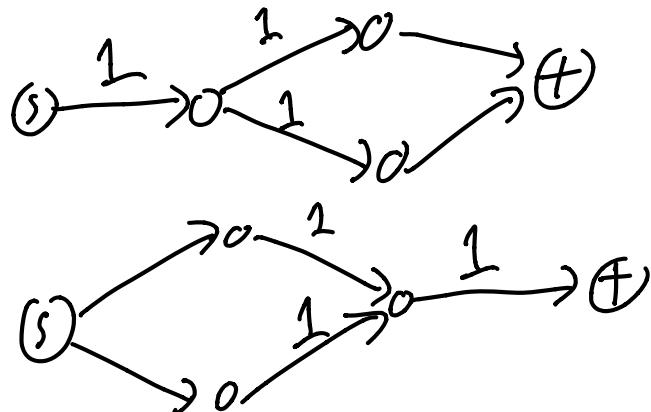
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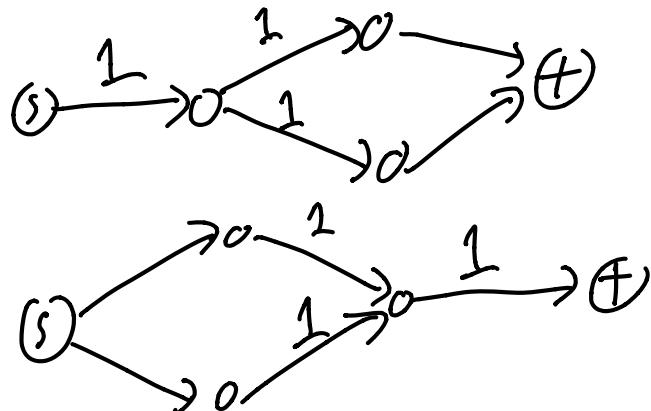
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- ▶ $f'(s, u) = 1$ if u matched in M' , otherwise 0
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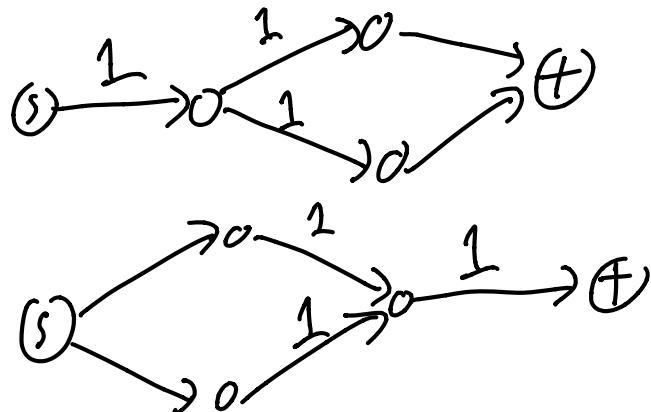
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- ▶ Contradiction

Running Time

Running Time:

- ▶ $O(n + m)$ to make new graph
- ▶ $|f| = |M| \leq n/2$ iterations of FF

⇒ $O(n(m+n)) = O(mn)$ time (assuming $m \geq \Omega(n)$)

Exnsions

Many extensions:

- ▶ Max-weight bipartite matching
- ▶ Min-cost perfect matching
- ▶ Matchings in general graphs
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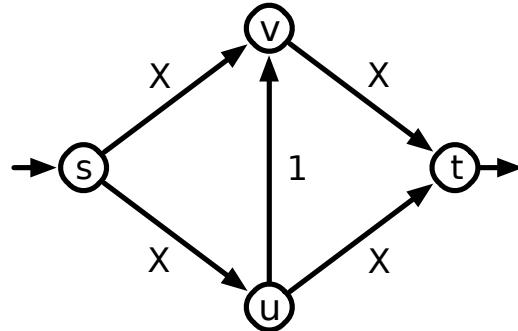
Still active area of study!

- ▶ Michael Dinitz, Sungjin Im, Thomas Lavastida, Benjamin Moseley, Sergei Vassilvitskii. *Faster Matchings via Learned Duals*. NeurIPS 2021.
- ▶ Michael Dinitz, George Li, Quanquan Liu, Felix Zhou. *Differentially Private Matchings*. Submitted, on arXiv.

Edmonds-Karp

Intuition

Bad example for Ford-Fulkerson:

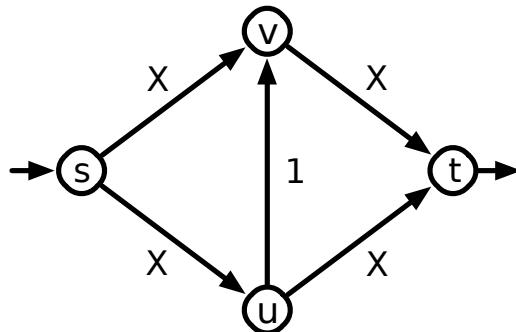


If Ford-Fulkerson chooses bad augmenting paths, super slow!

A bad example for the Ford-Fulkerson algorithm.

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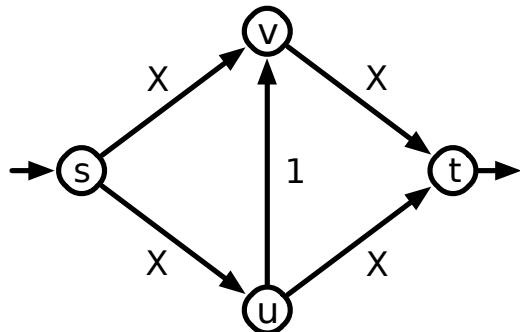
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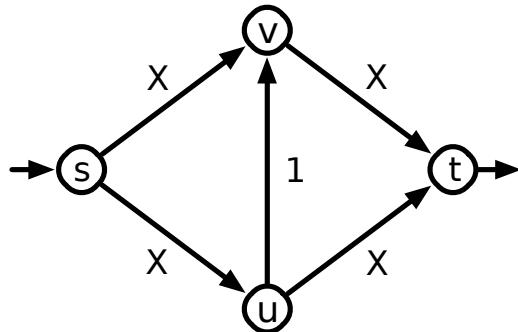
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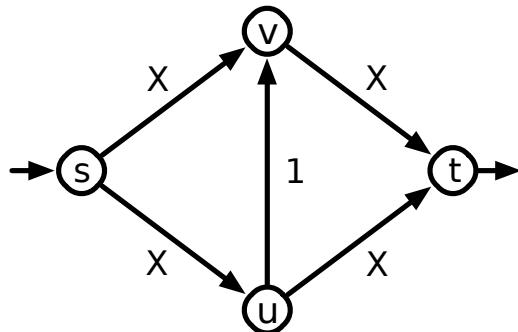
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Obvious path to pick:

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Less obvious path to pick:

$$\arg \min_{\text{augmenting paths } P} |P| \quad (\text{augmenting path with fewest edges})$$

Edmonds-Karp

Use Ford-Fulkerson, but pick *shortest* augmenting path (unweighted)

- ▶ Ignore capacities, just find augmenting path with fewest hops!
- ▶ Easy to compute with BFS in $O(m + n)$ time.
- ▶ Correct, since just FF with particular path choice.

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Theorem

Edmonds-Karp has at most $O(mn)$ iterations, so at most $O(m^2n)$ running time (if $m \geq n$)

Proof (sketch) of Edmonds-Karp

Idea: prove that distance from s to t (unweighted) goes up by at least one every $\leq m$ iterations.

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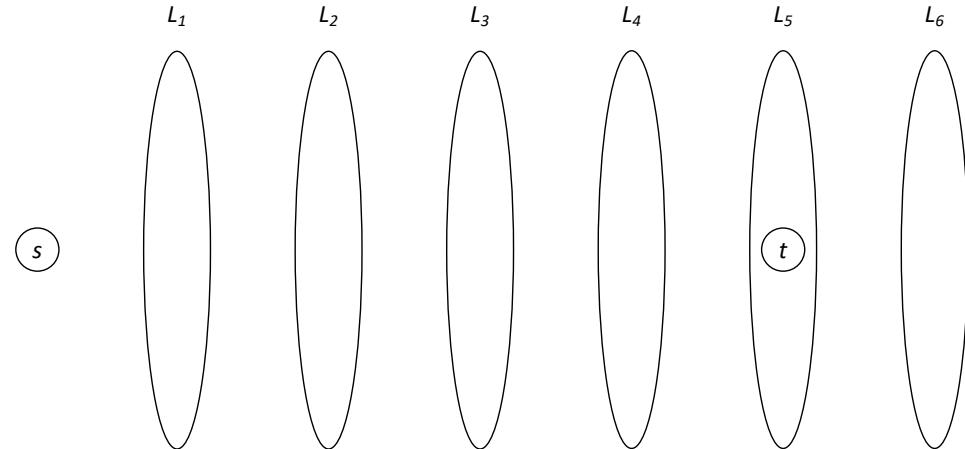
Idea: prove that distance from s to t (unweighted) goes up by at least one every $\leq m$ iterations.

- ▶ Distance initially $\geq 1 \implies$ distance $> n$ after at most mn iterations
 - ▶ Only distance larger than n is ∞ : no $s \rightarrow t$ path
- \implies Terminates after at most mn iterations.

Proof (sketch) of Edmonds-Karp (continued)

Suppose $s \rightarrow t$ distance is d .

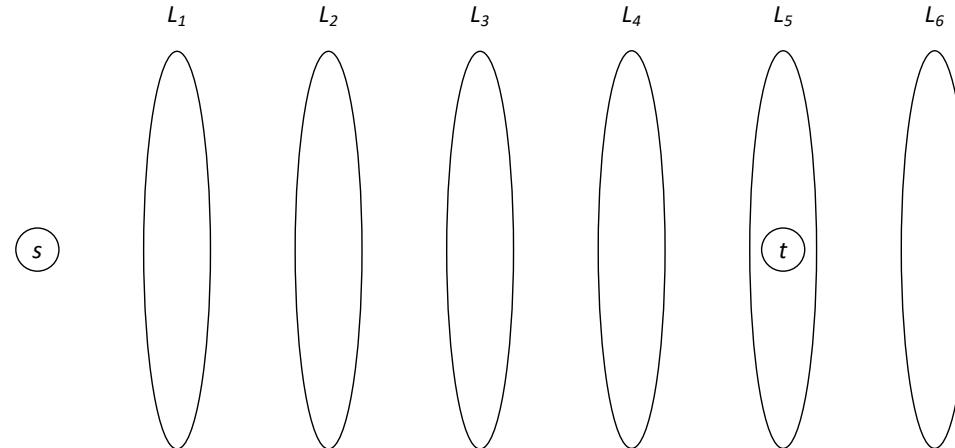
“Lay out” residual graph in levels by BFS (distance from s)



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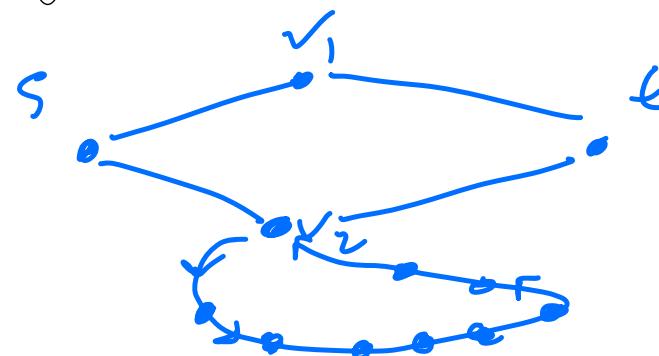
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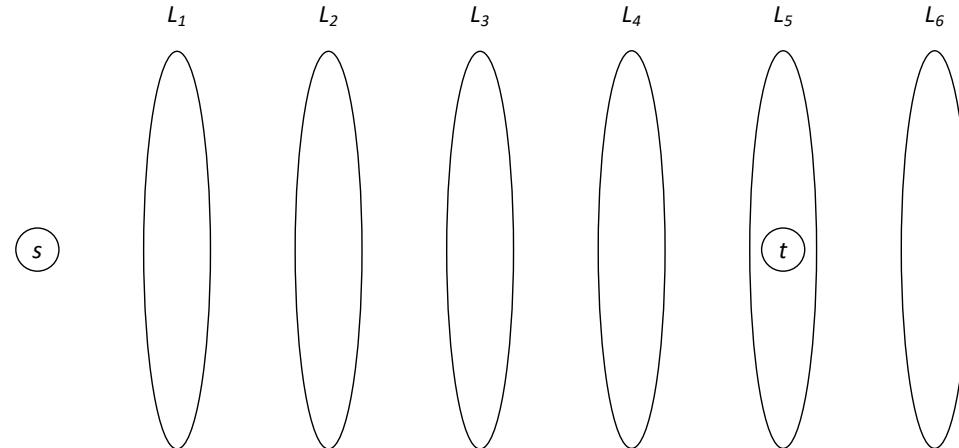
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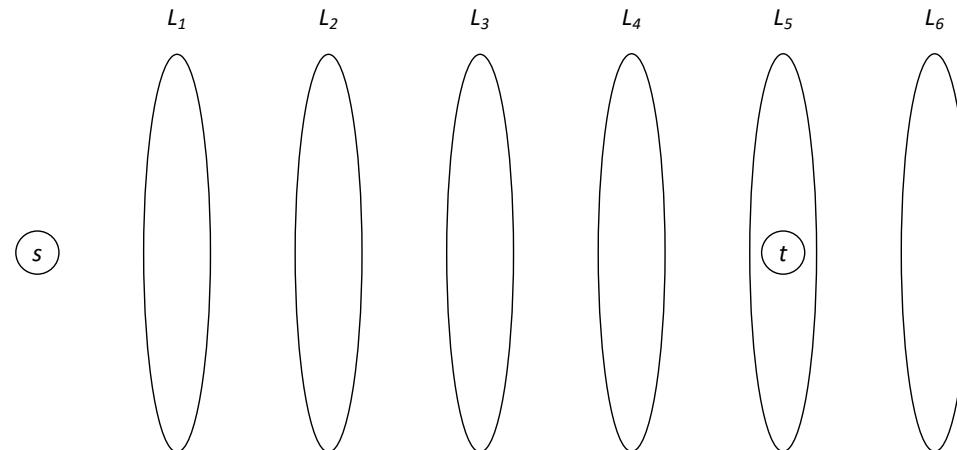
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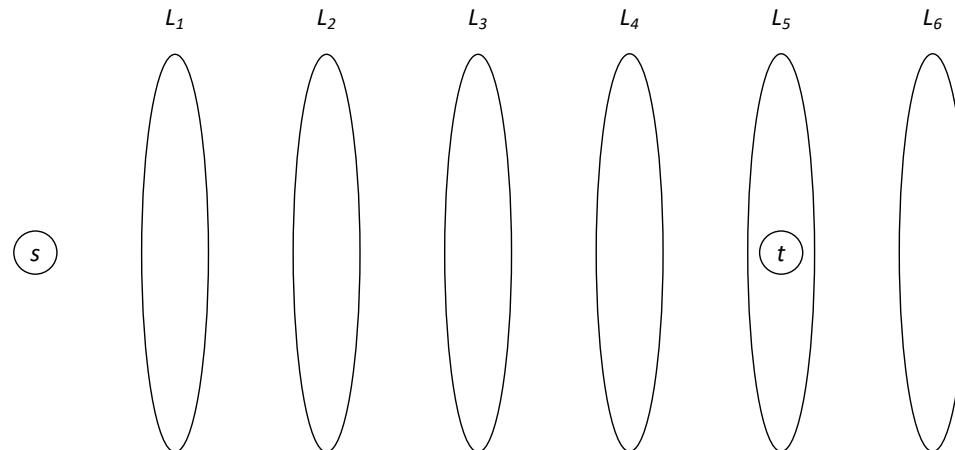
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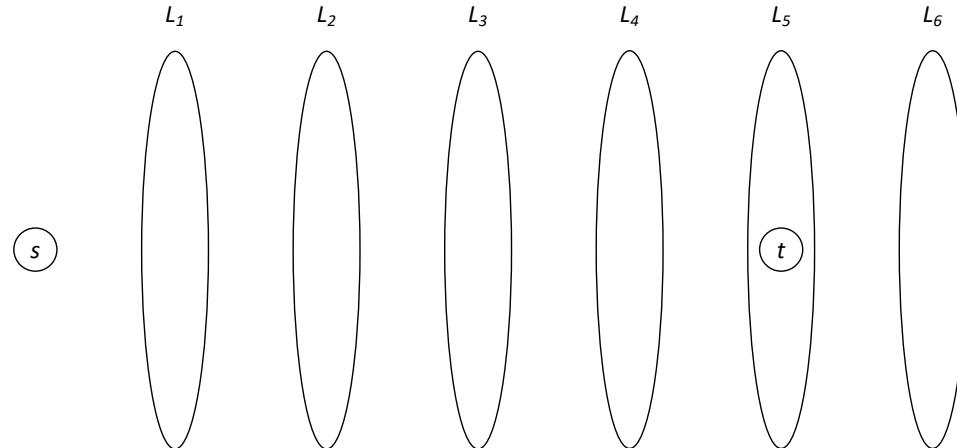
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So after m iterations (same layout): no path using only forward edges \implies distance larger than d !

Finishing Edmonds-Karp

So at most mn iterations. Each iteration unweighted shortest path: BFS, time $O(m + n)$

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So at most mn iterations. Each iteration unweighted shortest path: BFS, time $O(m + n)$

Total time: $O(mn(m + n)) = O(m^2n)$. Independent of F !

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□

Does this imply at most m iterations?

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By induction: after iteration i , at most $F(1 - 1/m)^i$ flow remaining to be sent.

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How much flow remains to be sent after iteration i ?

- ▶ $i = 0$: F
- ▶ $i = 1$: Sent at least F/m , so at most $F - F/m = F(1 - 1/m)$ remaining
- ▶ $i = 2$: Sent at least R/m if R was remaining after iteration 1, so at most $R - R/m = R(1 - 1/m) \leq F(1 - 1/m)^2$ remaining

By induction: after iteration i , at most $F(1 - 1/m)^i$ flow remaining to be sent.

Super useful inequality: $1 + x \leq e^x$ for all $x \in \mathbb{R}$

Running Time II

Theorem

If F is the value of the maximum flow and all capacities are integers, # iterations is at most $O(m \log F)$

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- ▶ $i = 1$: Sent at least F/m , so at most $F - F/m = F(1 - 1/m)$ remaining
- ▶ $i = 2$: Sent at least R/m if R was remaining after iteration 1, so at most $R - R/m = R(1 - 1/m) \leq F(1 - 1/m)^2$ remaining

By induction: after iteration i , at most $F(1 - 1/m)^i$ flow remaining to be sent.

Super useful inequality: $1 + x \leq e^x$ for all $x \in \mathbb{R}$

⇒ If $i > m \ln F$, amount remaining to be sent at most

$$F(1 - 1/m)^i < F(1 - 1/m)^{m \ln F} \leq F(e^{-1/m})^{m \ln F} = F \cdot e^{-\ln F} = 1$$

But all capacities integers, so must be finished!

Finishing up

Modified version of Dijkstra: find widest path in $O(m \log n)$ time

- ▶ Total time $O(m \log n \cdot m \log F) = O(m^2 \log n \log F)$
- ▶ Polynomial time!

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We saw earlier how to get running time independent of F (a *strongly* polynomial-time algorithm running in $O(m^2n)$).

Extensions

Many better algorithms for max-flow: *blocking flows* (Dinitz's algorithm (not that Dinitz)), *push-relabel* algorithms, etc.

- ▶ CLRS has a few of these.
- ▶ State of the art:
 - ▶ Strongly polynomial: $O(mn)$. Orlin [2013] & King, Rao, Tarjan [1994]
 - ▶ Weakly Polynomial: $O(m^{1+o(1)} \log U)$ (where U is maximum capacity). Chen, Kyng, Liu, Peng, Gutenberg and Sachdeva [2022]

Many other variants of flows, some of which are just $s - t$ max flow in disguise!

- ▶ Min-Cost Max-Flow: every edge also has a cost. Find minimum cost max-flow. Can be solved with just normal max flow!