

A note on flow polynomials of graphs

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Abstract

Using the decomposition theory of modular and integral flow polynomials, we answer a problem of Beck and Zaslavsky, by providing a general situation in which the integral flow polynomial is a multiple of the modular flow polynomial.

Key words: totally cyclic orientation, Eulerian-equivalence class, integral flow polynomial, modular flow polynomial, isomorphism

AMS Classification: 05C70, 05C30

In this note we present an answer to an open problem proposed by Beck and Zaslavsky [1] in the decomposition theory of flow polynomials, by showing a general situation in which the integral flow polynomial is a multiple of the modular flow polynomial.

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Let us start with reviewing some definitions and notations. By a *graph* $G = (V(G), E(G))$, we mean that G has finite vertex set $V(G)$ and edge set $E(G)$. Loops and multiple edges are allowed. Assume that all graphs considered here are connected. Each edge $e \in E(G)$ is incident with two vertices $u, v \in V(G)$, and it can be assigned a direction either from u to v or from v to u , but not both. In particular, a loop has two directions from a vertex to itself. If each edge of G has a direction, we say that G is *oriented*. Let $\mathcal{O}(G)$ denote the set of all orientations of G .

Fix an orientation $\varepsilon \in \mathcal{O}(G)$. By a *circle* of G we mean a 2-regular connected subgraph in G . A *directed cycle* is a circle in which all edges have a consistent direction with respect to ε . We say that ε is a *totally cyclic orientation* if every edge belongs to a directed cycle. Denote the set of totally cyclic orientations by $\mathcal{CO}(G)$. Given two orientations $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2 \in \mathcal{O}(G)$, let $E(\varepsilon_1 \neq \varepsilon_2)$ denote the subset of $E(G)$ composed of the edges having opposite directions with respect to ε_1 and ε_2 . We say that $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2$ are *Eulerian-equivalent* if $E(\varepsilon_1 \neq \varepsilon_2)$ can be written as a disjoint union of directed cycles. As shown in [3,4], Eulerian-equivalence relation is indeed an equivalence relation on $\mathcal{O}(G)$ and induces an equivalence relation on $\mathcal{CO}(G)$. Let $[\varepsilon]$ be the Eulerian-equivalence class of ε . Let $[\mathcal{CO}(G)]$ be the set of all Eulerian-equivalence classes in $\mathcal{CO}(G)$.

For a fixed orientation $\varepsilon \in \mathcal{O}(G)$ and a given vertex $v \in V(G)$, let $E^+(v, \varepsilon)$ be the set of edges taking v as the head and $E^-(v, \varepsilon)$ the set of edges taking v as the tail. A *nowhere-zero flow* of G is a function $f : E(G) \rightarrow A$ such that

$$\sum_{e \in E^+(v, \varepsilon)} f(e) = \sum_{e \in E^-(v, \varepsilon)} f(e), \quad \forall v \in V(G)$$

holds, where A is an abelian group and f never takes the value 0. Taking $A = \mathbb{Z}$, an integral nowhere-zero flow is called a *nowhere-zero k -flow* if $|f(e)| < k$

for every edge $e \in E(G)$. It was known that both the number of nowhere-zero flows with values in a finite abelian group and the number of nowhere-zero k -flows are independent of the chosen orientation and the actual group structure [3,4,6,7]. The former one is a polynomial function of the order of the finite abelian group A , and is called the *modular flow polynomial*, denoted $\phi(G, k)$. The latter one is a polynomial function of k , and is called the *integral flow polynomial*, denoted $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, k)$. For each orientation $\varepsilon \in \mathcal{O}(G)$, the number of nowhere-zero integral flows with values in $\{0, 1, \dots, k-1\}$ is also a polynomial function of k [3,4], denoted $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, \varepsilon, k)$.

Lemma 1 ([3,4]) *If ε and ε' are two Eulerian-equivalent orientations, then*

$$\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, \varepsilon, k) = \phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, \varepsilon', k). \quad (1)$$

Beck and Zaslavsky noticed that both $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(3K_2, x)$ ($3K_2$ is the graph of 3 parallel links) and $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(K_4, x)$ (K_4 is the complete graph of 4 vertices) have integral coefficients, and moreover $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(3K_2, x) = 3\phi(3K_2, x)$, $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(K_4, x) = 4\phi(K_4, x)$; see [1, Example 3.4]. Then, they proposed the following problem [1, Problem 3.5]:

Is there any general reason why for $3K_2$ and K_4 both of the integral flow polynomials have integral coefficients and the integral flow polynomial is a multiple of the modular polynomial?

Now we can answer the above problem. Note that the modular flow polynomials always have integral coefficients [1,3]. Therefore, we focus on the reason why $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, x)$ is a multiple of $\phi(G, x)$ for some graph G . In fact, the answer is implied in the following theorem due to Kochol [4, Equations (1) and (2)] and Chen and Stanley [3, Theorems 4.4 and 5.6], which shows that the modular

and integral flow polynomials admit a nice decomposition.

Proposition 2 ([3,4]) *Given a graph G , let $\phi(G, x)$ be the modular flow polynomial and $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, x)$ the integral flow polynomial. Then*

$$\phi(G, x) = \sum_{[\varepsilon] \in [\mathcal{CO}(G)]} \phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, \varepsilon, x) \quad (2)$$

$$\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, x) = \sum_{\varepsilon \in \mathcal{CO}(G)} \phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, \varepsilon, x) \quad (3)$$

Note that similar results hold for integral and modular tension polynomials of graphs, see [2,5]. Our main result is an immediate consequence of Lemma 1 and Proposition 2.

Theorem 3 *If each equivalence class of $[\mathcal{CO}(G)]$ has the same number of totally cyclic orientations, say m , then we have*

$$\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, x) = m\phi(G, x). \quad (4)$$

Before answering the problem of Beck and Zaslavsky, let us recall the definition of isomorphism between two directed multigraphs. Suppose $D = (V, E)$ and $D' = (V', E')$ are directed multigraphs. We say that D is *isomorphic* to D' if there is a bijection $\theta : V \rightarrow V'$ such that for all vertices u, v in V the number of edges from u to v in D is the same as the number of edges from $\theta(u)$ to $\theta(v)$ in D' . Then θ is called an *isomorphism* from D to D' . Given a graph G , note that each orientation $\varepsilon \in \mathcal{O}(G)$ determines a unique directed graph D_{ε} . We say that two orientations $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2 \in \mathcal{O}(G)$ are *isomorphic* if D_{ε_1} and D_{ε_2} are isomorphic to each other. By Theorem 3, we obtain the following result.

Corollary 4 *If G is a graph such that any two non-Eulerian-equivalent orientations in $\mathcal{CO}(G)$ are isomorphic, then the integral flow polynomial $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, x)$*

has integral coefficients and is a multiple of the modular flow polynomial $\phi(G, x)$.

Proof. If $[\mathcal{CO}(G)]$ has only one Eulerian-equivalence class, then the result clearly holds. Otherwise, suppose that ε_1 and ε_2 are any two totally cyclic orientations which are not Eulerian-equivalent, and we will show that $[\varepsilon_1]$ and $[\varepsilon_2]$ have the same number of totally cyclic orientations. Let θ be the isomorphism from D_{ε_1} to D_{ε_2} . For any orientation ε'_1 in $[\varepsilon_1]$, the edge set $E(\varepsilon_1 \neq \varepsilon'_1)$ can be written as a disjoint union of directed cycles with respect to ε_1 . Since ε_1 and ε_2 are isomorphic, then the edge set $E(\varepsilon_1 \neq \varepsilon'_1)$ can also be written as a disjoint union of directed cycles with respect to ε_2 . For the orientation ε_2 , by reversing the direction of the edges in $E(\varepsilon_1 \neq \varepsilon'_1)$ and keeping the direction of other edges, we obtain an orientation ε'_2 which obviously belongs to $[\varepsilon_2]$. Note that the orientation ε'_2 is uniquely determined by ε'_1 when fixing $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon'_1$ and the isomorphism from D_{ε_1} to D_{ε_2} . This implies that the cardinality of $[\varepsilon_1]$ is less than or equal to that of $[\varepsilon_2]$. Similarly, we can prove that the cardinality of $[\varepsilon_2]$ is less than or equal to that of $[\varepsilon_1]$. Therefore, each Eulerian-equivalence class of $[\mathcal{CO}(G)]$ has the same number of totally cyclic orientations. Applying Theorem 3, we complete the proof. \blacksquare

In particular, we have the following conclusion.

Corollary 5 *If G is $3K_2$ or K_4 , then any two totally cyclic orientations of $\mathcal{CO}(G)$ are isomorphic. Therefore, in both cases the integral flow polynomial is a multiple of the modular flow polynomial.*

Proof. Let us first consider graph $3K_2$ with the vertex set $\{v_1, v_2\}$. For any totally cyclic orientation $\varepsilon \in \mathcal{CO}(3K_2)$, we have either $|E^+(v_1, \varepsilon)| = 2$ or $|E^+(v_1, \varepsilon)| = 1$. Given any two totally cyclic orientations ε_1 and ε_2 , if $|E^+(v_1, \varepsilon_1)| =$

$|E^+(v_1, \varepsilon_2)|$ then the identity map is an isomorphism between D_{ε_1} and D_{ε_2} . If $|E^+(v_1, \varepsilon_1)| \neq |E^+(v_1, \varepsilon_2)|$, then we take the bijection θ given by $\theta(v_1) = v_2$ and $\theta(v_2) = v_1$ as the desired isomorphism.

For any totally cyclic orientation $\varepsilon \in \mathcal{CO}(K_4)$, the equality

$$\sum_{v \in V(K_4)} |E^+(v, \varepsilon)| = \sum_{v \in V(K_4)} |E^-(v, \varepsilon)|$$

forces that there are exactly two vertices, say v_1, v_2 , such that $|E^+(v_1, \varepsilon)| = |E^+(v_2, \varepsilon)| = 2$, and exactly two vertices, say v_3, v_4 , such that $|E^+(v_3, \varepsilon)| = |E^+(v_4, \varepsilon)| = 1$. Without loss of generality, we may assume that for ε the edge incident with $\{v_1, v_2\}$ is directed from v_2 to v_1 and the edge incident with $\{v_2, v_3\}$ is directed from v_3 to v_2 . In this case, the directions of the remained edges are uniquely determined. For any two orientations $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2 \in \mathcal{CO}(K_4)$, we label the vertices of D_{ε_1} and D_{ε_2} as above. Suppose that $V(D_{\varepsilon_1}) = \{v_1, v_2, v_3, v_4\}$ and $V(D_{\varepsilon_2}) = \{v'_1, v'_2, v'_3, v'_4\}$. Then the bijection θ with $\theta(v_i) = v'_i$ is clearly an isomorphism between D_{ε_1} and D_{ε_2} . ■

Theorem 3, Corollary 4 and 5 actually present an answer to the problem of Beck and Zaslavsky. For the graph $3K_2$, there are 2 Eulerian-equivalence classes in $[\mathcal{CO}(3K_2)]$, and each class has 3 totally cyclic orientations. Therefore, $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(3K_2, x) = 3\phi(3K_2, x)$. For the graph K_4 , there are 6 Eulerian-equivalence classes in $[\mathcal{CO}(K_4)]$, and each class has 4 totally cyclic orientations. Therefore, $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(K_4, x) = 4\phi(K_4, x)$. However, there exists some graph G for which the condition of Corollary 4 is not satisfied but its integral flow polynomial $\phi_{\mathbb{Z}}(G, x)$ is still a multiple of $\phi(G, x)$. For such a graph, the reader may consult the graph K_4 minus one edge.

Acknowledgments. The Research was supported by RGC Competitive Ear-

marked Research Grant 600506. The second author was also supported by the 973 Project on Mathematical Mechanization, the PCSIRT Project of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Science and Technology, and the National Science Foundation of China. We would like to thank Professor Thomas Zaslavsky for his interest in this work and we are also grateful to two anonymous referees for their valuable comments.

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