Mathematical Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society

VOL. 83 MAY 1978 PART 3

Math. Proc. Camb. Phil. Soc. (1978), **83**, 347
Printed in Great Britain

Cocircuit coverings and packings for binary matroids

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(*Revised version received* 28 *October* 1977)

If M is an arbitrary loopless matroid with ground set $E(M)$ and rank function ρ, then let $\alpha(M)$ be the minimum size of a set of cocircuits of M, whose union is $E(M)$, and let $\beta(M)$ be the maximum size of a set of pairwise disjoint cocircuits of M. The following conjecture is based on Gallai's theorem that the vertex-stability and vertex-covering numbers of a graph G sum to the number of vertices of G (1).

CONJECTURE 1. (Welsh (see (4)).) *If M has $k(M)$ components, then*

$$\alpha(M)+\beta(M) \leqslant \rho(M)+k(M).$$

In this paper we prove this conjecture when M is binary.

The matroid terminology used here will in general follow Welsh (5). However, if $T = \{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m\}$ we shall denote the restriction of M to $S\backslash T$ by $M\backslash T$ or

$$M\backslash x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m$$

and the contraction of M to $S\backslash T$ by M/T or $M/x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_m$. The symmetric difference of sets A and B will be denoted by $A \triangle B$, and $\mathscr{C}(M)$ and $\mathscr{C}^*(M)$ will denote respectively the set of circuits of M and the set of cocircuits of M. A flat of M of rank one will be called a *point* of M.

The next three results, which are well known (see, for example, ((5), theorems 5.1.1, 2.1.6 and 10.1.3)), will be used frequently in the proof of the main theorem.

LEMMA 1. *Let C^* be a cocircuit of a matroid M and let x and y be distinct elements of C^*. Then there exists a circuit C of M such that $C \cap C^* = \{x, y\}$.*

LEMMA 2. *For a matroid M, if C is a circuit and C^* is a cocircuit, then*

(*a*) $|C \cap C^*| \neq 1$.

Moreover, if M is binary, then

(*b*) $|C \cap C^*|$ *is even.*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305004100054633 Published online by Cambridge University Press

LEMMA 3. *If C_1 and C_2 are circuits of a binary matroid M, then $C_1 \triangle C_2$ is a disjoint union of circuits.*

If M is a matroid having no coloops, then let $\alpha^*(M) = \alpha(M^*)$ and $\beta^*(M) = \beta(M^*)$. We now prove that the dual of Conjecture 1, and hence Conjecture 1, holds for binary matroids.

THEOREM 1. *Let M be a binary matroid having no coloops. Then*

$$\alpha^*(M) + \beta^*(M) \leqslant |E(M)| - \rho(M) + k(M). \tag{1}$$

Proof. We argue by induction on $|E(M)|$. Clearly (1) holds for $|E(M)| = 1$. Assume it holds for $|E(M)| < n$ and suppose that $|E(M)| = n$. We may also assume that M is connected, for otherwise the result follows easily by the induction assumption.

Assume that M has a set of p pairwise parallel elements ($p \geqslant 2$). If $p = n$, then $M \cong U_{1,n}$ and (1) is easily verified.

LEMMA 4. *If $\{x_1, x_2, \ldots, x_p\}$ is a set of pairwise parallel elements of M and $3 \leqslant p < n$, then (1) holds by the induction assumption.*

Proof. Clearly $k(M\backslash x_1, x_2) = k(M)$,

$$\rho(M\backslash x_1, x_2) = \rho(M) \quad \text{and} \quad |E(M\backslash x_1, x_2)| = |E(M)| - 2.$$

Moreover, since M is connected, $\alpha^*(M\backslash x_1, x_2) + 1 \geqslant \alpha^*(M)$. The lemma will be proved if we can show that

$$\beta^*(M\backslash x_1, x_2) \geqslant \beta^*(M) - 1. \tag{2}$$

To verify this, suppose that $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_{\beta^*}\}$ is a maximal set of pairwise disjoint circuits of M. If either $\left|\left(\bigcup_{i=1}^{\beta^*} C_i\right) \cap \{x_1, x_2\}\right| \leqslant 1$ or $\{x_1, x_2\} = C_i$ for some i, then (2) is immediate. The only other possibility is that $x_1 \in C_i$ and $x_2 \in C_j$ for i and j distinct members of $\{1, 2, \ldots, \beta^*\}$. But $\{x_1, x_2\} \in \mathscr{C}(M)$ and hence $(C_j\backslash x_2) \cup x_1 \in \mathscr{C}(M)$. It follows that there is a circuit of M, and hence of $M\backslash x_1, x_2$, contained in $(C_i \cup ((C_j\backslash x_2) \cup x_1))\backslash x_1$. Therefore (2) holds and so Lemma 4 is proved.∎

By the above we may assume that

(3) No point of M contains more than two elements of $E(M)$.

We now distinguish three cases.

(I) M has a cocircuit of size two.

(II) Every cocircuit of M contains at least three elements but M has a cocircuit containing only two points.

(III) Every cocircuit of M contains at least three points.

Case I. If $\{c, d\}$ is a cocircuit of M, then $k(M/c) = k(M)$ and $\rho^*(M/c) = \rho^*(M)$. Moreover, by Lemma 2(a), $\alpha^*(M/c) = \alpha^*(M)$ and $\beta^*(M/c) = \beta^*(M)$. The result follows by applying the induction assumption to M/c.

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Case II. Let C_1^* be a cocircuit of M containing at least three elements but only two points. Then by (3), either

(i) $C_1^* = \{u, v, w\}$, where $\{u, v\}$ and $\{w\}$ are points of M; or

(ii) $C_1^* = \{u, v, w, x\}$, where $\{u, v\}$ and $\{w, x\}$ are points of M.

Case II (i). By Lemma 2(*a*), since M is connected, M/w is connected. Moreover, $\rho^*(M/w) = \rho^*(M)$ and $\beta^*(M/w) \geqslant \beta^*(M)$. We shall show that $\alpha^*(M/w) \geqslant \alpha^*(M)$ from which (1) will follow by induction. Suppose that $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\}$ is a minimal collection of circuits of M/w whose union is $E(M/w)$. If for some i in $\{1, 2, \ldots, t\}$, $C_i \cup w$ is a circuit of M, then (1) holds. Therefore suppose that for all $1 \leqslant i \leqslant t$, C_i is a circuit of M. The next lemma completes the proof for case II (i).

LEMMA 5. *Let $\{c, d, e\}$ be a cocircuit of a binary connected matroid N, where $\{d, e\}$ and $\{c\}$ are points of N. If $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\}$ is a minimal collection of circuits of N/c covering $E(N/c)$ and $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\} \subseteq \mathscr{C}(N)$, then there is a set of t circuits of N covering $E(N)$ such that c is in exactly two of these circuits.*

Proof. It is straightforward to show that N has a cocircuit D^* such that D^* contains d but not c. Then by Lemma 2(*a*), $D^* \cap \{c, d, e\} = \{d, e\}$. Hence $D^* \in \mathscr{C}^*(N/c)$.

Since $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\} \subseteq \mathscr{C}(N)$, we have by Lemma 2(*a*) that $\{d, e\} \in \{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\}$, say $\{d, e\} = C_1$. Thus $C_i \cap \{d, e\} = \varnothing$ for $2 \leqslant i \leqslant t$. Since D^* properly contains $\{d, e\}$, for some j in $\{2, 3, \ldots, t\}$, say $j = 2$, $C_j \cap D^* \neq \varnothing$. Now, since N is connected, there is a circuit of N containing c and intersecting C_2. Among such circuits choose one, say F_1, such that $|F_1 \backslash C_2|$ is minimal. Since $F_1 \cap \{c, d, e\} \neq \varnothing$, we have by Lemma 2(*a*) that F_1 contains exactly one of d and e, say d. Consider $F_1 \triangle C_2$. This contains a circuit F_2 containing d and c. By the choice of F_1 it follows that $F_2 \backslash C_2 = F_1 \backslash C_2$. But $F_2 \backslash C_2 = F_2 \cap F_1$. Therefore by Lemma 3, $C_2 \backslash F_1 = F_2 \backslash F_1$ and so $F_2 = F_1 \triangle C_2$. But now

$$\{(F_1 \backslash d) \cup e, F_2, C_3, \ldots, C_t\}$$

is a set of circuits of N covering $E(N)$ and c is in both $(F_1 \backslash d) \cup e$ and F_2. ∎

Case II (ii). M/w has two components: a loop, $\{x\}$, and $M/w \backslash x$. Thus

$$k(M) = k(M/w) - 1.$$

Moreover, $\beta^*(M/w) \geqslant \beta^*(M)$. We show that

$$\alpha^*(M) \leqslant \alpha^*(M/w) - 1, \tag{4}$$

from which (1) follows using the induction assumption.

Let $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\}$ be a minimal collection of circuits of M/w covering $E(M/w)$. Then $\{x\} \in \{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_t\}$, say $\{x\} = C_t$. If for distinct elements i and j of $\{1, 2, \ldots, t-1\}$, $C_i \cup w$ and $C_j \cup w$ are circuits of M, then $C_i \cup w$ and $C_j \cup x$ are circuits of M and (4) holds. Next suppose that there is exactly one element i of $\{1, 2, \ldots, t-1\}$ such that $C_i \cup w$ is a circuit of M. Then, as

$$x \notin \bigcup_{i=1}^{t-1} C_i,$$

Lemma 2(*a*) implies that $\{u, v\} \in \{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_{t-1}\}$, say $\{u, v\} = C_1$. Now $|(C_i \cup w) \cap C_1^*|$ is non-zero and hence exceeds one, and $x \notin (C_i \cup w) \cap C_1^*$. Therefore C_i contains one of u and v, say u. But then $(C_i \backslash u) \cup v$ is a circuit of M/w and so, by Lemma 2(*a*),

$$(C_i \backslash u) \cup v \cup w$$

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is a circuit of M. Thus $(C_i \backslash u) \cup v \cup x$ is a circuit of M and

$$\{(C_i \backslash u) \cup v \cup x, C_2, \ldots, C_{i-1}, C_i \cup w, C_{i+1}, \ldots, C_{t-1}\}$$

is a collection of $t-1$ circuits of M whose union is $E(M)$. Hence (4) holds.

To complete case II(ii), suppose that for all i in $\{1, 2, \ldots, t-1\}$, C_i is a circuit of M and hence of $M \backslash x$. In this case, we have, on taking $N = M \backslash x$ in Lemma 5, that there is a covering $\mathscr{K}$ of $E(M \backslash x)$ with $t-1$ circuits of $M \backslash x$ such that w is in exactly two of these circuits, say K_1 and K_2. Now $\mathscr{C}(M \backslash x) \subseteq \mathscr{C}(M)$ and $(K_2 \backslash w) \cup x \in \mathscr{C}(M)$. Thus replacing K_2 by $(K_2 \backslash w) \cup x$ in $\mathscr{K}$ gives a covering of $E(M)$ with $t-1$ circuits of M; that is (4) holds.

Case III. If every cocircuit of M contains at least three points and $\overline{M}$ is the simple matroid associated with M, then every cocircuit of $\overline{M}$ contains at least three elements. Moreover, $\overline{M}$ is connected.

The next lemma is an analogue for binary matroids of a graph-theoretic result of Kaugars (see (2), p. 31).

LEMMA 6. (P. D. Seymour, private communication.) *Let N be a simple connected binary matroid having no cocircuits of size less than three. Then N has a connected hyperplane.*

Proof. Suppose that every circuit of N has size $\rho(N)+1$. Then, since N has no cocircuits of size two, N has at least two circuits. Let y and z be distinct elements of a circuit C_1 of N and suppose that $x \in E(N) \backslash C_1$. Then $(C_1 \backslash y) \cup x$ and $(C_1 \backslash z) \cup x$ are circuits of N and hence by Lemma 3, $((C_1 \backslash y) \cup x) \triangle ((C_1 \backslash z) \cup x) = \{y, z\}$ is a disjoint union of circuits of N, contradicting the simplicity of N.

We may therefore assume that N has a circuit of size less than $\rho(N)+1$ and hence that $E(N)$ has a non-empty subset A which is maximal with respect to being both connected and non-spanning. Clearly A is a flat of N.

As N is connected there is a circuit intersecting both A and its complement. Choose such a circuit C_1 so that $|C_1 \cap (E(N) \backslash A)| = m$ is minimal. We show that $m = 2$ from which it follows that A is a hyperplane and hence that A is the required connected hyperplane of N.

If $C_1 \supseteq E(N) \backslash A$ and c and d are distinct elements of $E(N) \backslash A$, then, by the choice of C_1, every circuit of N containing one of c and d also contains the other. Thus, by ((5), theorem 2.1.6), $\{c, d\}$ is a cocircuit of N, a contradiction. Therefore $E(N) \backslash (A \cup C_1)$ is non-empty so let x be an element of this set. As $C_1 \cup A$ is connected, we have, by the choice of A, that $C_1 \cup A$ is spanning. Thus $C_1 \cup A$ contains a base B of N. Let C_2 be the fundamental circuit of x with respect to B. Then either $C_2 \cap A = \varnothing$ or not. In the first case, by Lemma 3, $C_1 \triangle C_2$ contains a circuit C_4 containing x. Then, as $C_2 \backslash x \subseteq C_1$, we have, by Lemma 2(*a*), that $C_4 \cap A \neq \varnothing$. Hence $|C_4 \cap C_1 \cap (E(N) \backslash A)| \geqslant m-1$ and so $|C_2| \leqslant 2$, a contradiction. Thus we may assume that $C_2 \cap A \neq \varnothing$. Then, since $|C_2 \cap (E(N) \backslash A)| \geqslant m$, by Lemma 3, C_2 contains exactly $m-1$ elements of $C_1 \cap (E(N) \backslash A)$. But $C_1 \triangle C_2$ contains a circuit C_3 containing x which, since M is simple, intersects A. Thus $m = 2$ as required. ∎

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By this lemma we have, in case III, that $\bar{M}$ has a connected hyperplane. Therefore M has a connected hyperplane, H say. Let $E(M)\backslash H = C^*$ and let $\{C_1, C_2, \ldots, C_{\beta^*}\}$ be a maximal set of pairwise disjoint circuits of M.

If there is an element x of

$$C^*\backslash\left(\bigcup_{i=1}^{\beta^*} C_i\right),$$

then since $M\backslash C^*$ is connected and C^* contains at least three points of M we have, by Lemma 1, that $M\backslash x$ is connected. The result now follows by applying the induction assumption to $M\backslash x$.

Now suppose that $\bigcup_{i=1}^{\beta^*} C_i \supseteq C^*$. Then since, by Lemma 2 (b), $|C_i \cap C^*|$ is even for all i, $|C^*|$ is even and so $|C^*| \geqslant 4$. We choose two elements x and y from C^* as follows. If, for some i in $\{1, 2, \ldots, \beta^*\}$, $|C_i| = 2 = |C_i \cap C^*|$, then let $C_i = \{x, y\}$. Otherwise choose C_j such that $C_j \cap C^* \neq \varnothing$ and let x and y be any two elements of this intersection. In either case, it follows by Lemma 1 that $M\backslash x, y$ is connected. To see this, recall that C^* contains at least three points of M, $|C^*| \geqslant 4$, each element of M is parallel to at most one other element and $M\backslash C^*$ is connected. The result follows by applying the induction assumption to $M\backslash x, y$.

This completes the proof of case III and thereby finishes the proof of Theorem 1.|

The above proof makes frequent use of the fact that M is binary and the method does not seem to generalize to arbitrary non-binary matroids. In particular, Lemma 6 fails for $M \cong U_{3,5}$. However the method may be adapted to prove Conjecture 1 for bicircular matroids, such matroids having been studied in detail by Matthews (3).

The author thanks Dr D. J. A. Welsh for prompting his interest in Conjecture 1 and CSIRO (Australia) for their generous financial support. Theorem 1 was proved originally by the author for graphic matroids using, in place of Lemma 6, a result of Kaugars ((2), p. 31). The author is greatly indebted to Dr P. D. Seymour for suggesting that his proof could be generalized to binary matroids and for communicating the required analogue of Kaugars' theorem.

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