

Racial divide increasing fast in digital realm

Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON — The government's latest look at personal computer ownership and use shows huge gains in Americans using e-mail and owning computers at home, but it also reveals a widening "digital divide" between whites and minorities.

The Commerce Department report, released Tuesday, shows that whites are more than twice as likely to own a home computer as blacks or Hispanics, and a racial disparity in PC ownership exists even among families earning more than \$75,000.

The report, called "Falling through the Net II," said about 76 percent of white families with salaries over \$75,000 own home computers, compared with only 64 percent of black families at the same income level.

Across all incomes, about 41 percent of white families own PCs but only about 19 percent of black and Hispanic families have home computers.

"Now is the time to bridge the digital divide, prevent those who can benefit the most from falling through the net," said Vice President Al Gore, who used the report's findings to promote his plan to provide cheap Internet access to schools and libraries.

The survey of 48,000 families, conducted by the Census Bureau in late 1997, did not suggest how to

encourage computer ownership and Internet use among minorities, poor people, seniors and those living in rural areas. All those groups were among society's "least connected," the report said.

"It's shocking that these groups are being left behind," said Donna Hoffman, an expert at Vanderbilt University whose own study earlier this year found similar racial differences in owning computers and using the Internet. "This is like the trumpet sounding. People need to start banging the drums and doing something about this."

The study found: — People living in rural areas and the inner city, especially minorities, are slightly less likely to own computers and spend time online than those in urban areas.

— Only about 21 percent of seniors own PCs, and about 9 percent use the Internet at home. Nearly half the people 35-44 years old are connected.

"There was a period when the fear of technology was a major inhibiting factor, but more and more seniors are demonstrating that's not the

case anymore," said Andrea Wooten, president of Green Thumb Inc., a group that trains seniors.

"The thing motivating seniors is they want to communicate with their kids and their grandkids."

— College graduates are nearly 10 times more likely to own a computer than those without any high school education; about 10 percent of high school graduates use the Internet, but 38 percent with a college degree use it.

"If you're telling me that 80 percent of black America is

not going to be involved in commerce, the education, the political discourse, the information, the entertainment that the Internet provides... then we've got a problem as a nation," said Larry Irving, President Clinton's top telecommunications adviser.

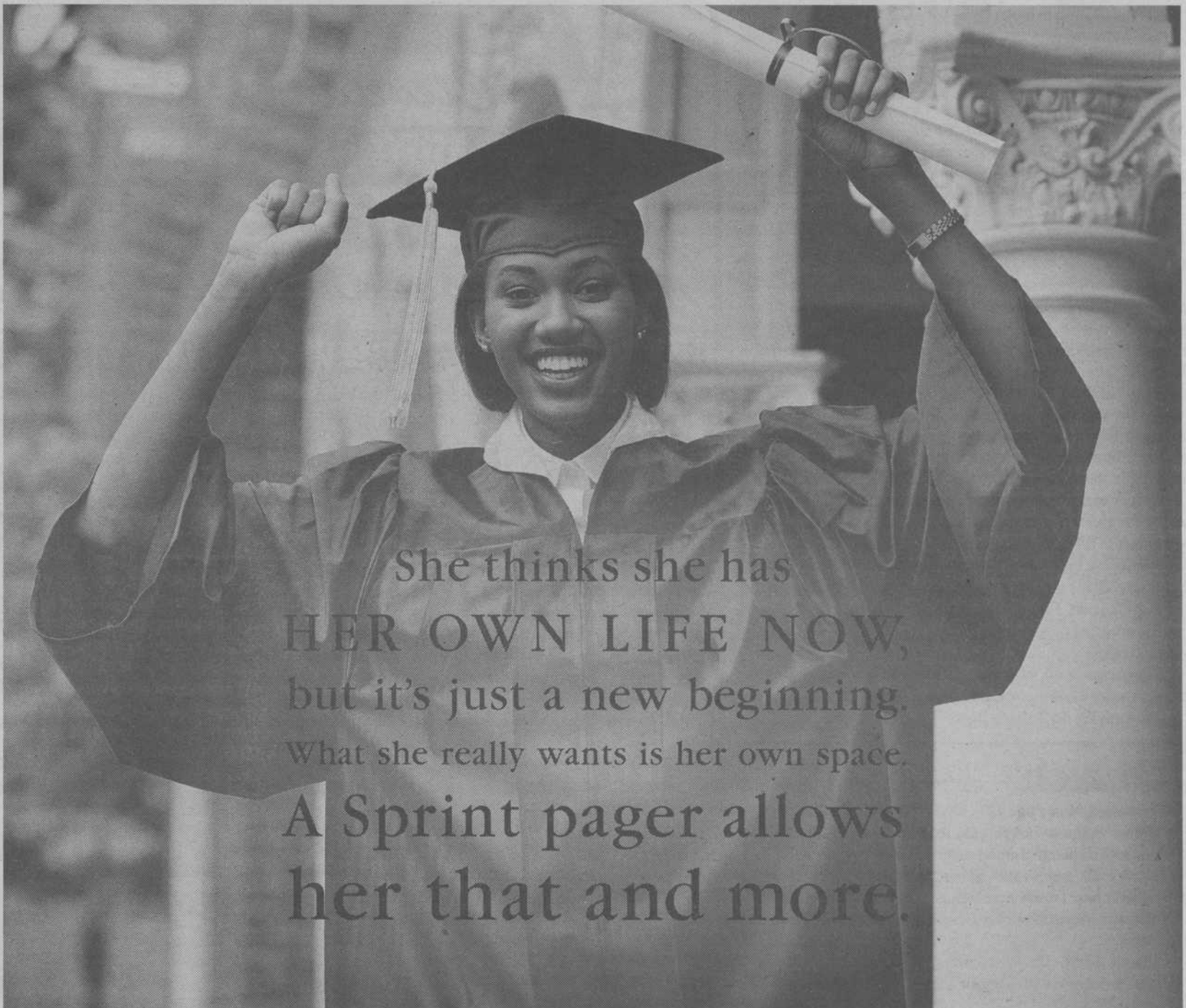
"The political, cultural and economic gaps in our society are only going to get exacerbated," added Irving, who is black.

The report also contained some positive news: Home computer ownership has grown by nearly 52 percent since

1994, and the number of people using e-mail at home has nearly quadrupled since then.

It said more than one-third of Americans, or 36 percent, own home PCs and about 19 percent use e-mail at home.

"We talk about connectivity around the world, but you can look right in the United States and in the inner cities," said Don Heath, president of the Internet Society, an international group that promotes the network. "The have-nots, they're just not there yet. You don't want a chasm wider than it already is."



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