I used to hear strange clicking sounds on my telephone and assume it was Verizon's usual level of service. Now I figure it's the National Security Agency. When USA Today broke the news that the Feds were tracking the phone records of tens of millions of ordinary Americans, allegedly in the interest of combating terrorism, apologists insisted that no one was listening in on individual calls. Except maybe for those calls made to foreign countries. I imagine transcripts of my many long and frustrating conversations with tech-service representatives based in India.

And yet there has been little outrage about what is essentially domestic spying, the notion that the same phone companies that cannot manage to get an installer to arrive on time nevertheless effortlessly turned over to the government the records of most households and businesses. Maybe people believe swapping personal data for national security is a fair trade. But maybe no one is agitated because the notion of privacy has become, like Atlantis, a persistent and attractive myth. The sad thing is that that's not so much because the government has invaded our privacy, but because we thoughtlessly gave it away bit by bit.

In the morning the ATM screen greets me: "Hello, Anna Quindlen!" The woman on the phone from J. Crew asks for the supersecret security code from the back of my Visa card. The credit-card company needs my date and place of birth and the last four digits of my Social Security number. Somewhere in computers there is a record of the books I've read, the music I like and the places outside the United States I've visited. A Web site even allows well-informed strangers to see how much I paid for my house and how much I might be able to get for it today. Add the satellite photos Google Earth provides, and you can peer at my roof. (When the resolution gets a little higher, everyone will know that the climbing hydrangea in the backyard is struggling.)

Luckily I am too old to be saddled with a Facebook profile. Facebook is a hugely popular site for college students in which they post pictures of themselves and their friends and describe their personalities, interests and even sexual preferences in what one expert has described as "egocasting." But students are beginning to see the downside of the site, and it's not just that way too many folks wind up knowing you appreciate, in the words of one profile, "being intoxicated, dancing all over the place, underwear shopping, electrical tape." Some colleges have announced they will discipline students whose Facebook entries show them
engaged in underage drinking or illicit drug use. Others have warned that prospective employers are trolling Facebook, and that when they have a choice between the applicant pictured in his boxers hoisting a beer bong and the one who is not, they are likely to hire the latter.

A man powers up his cell phone as a plane grinds to a halt and begins to have a business conversation beginning with the words "This is all under the cone of silence." Dozens of people listen in on just-between-us. It used to be that if you were stupid enough to give your boyfriend a picture of you in your underwear, he'd show it around to his dopey friends. Today he might post it online, and before you can say "pink lace," guys are looking at it in Boston, Brasilia and Beijing.

We've given away our personal information, our predilections, our secrets, even our shame, during transactions, conversations and Internet exchanges. Maybe the notion that the government is keeping track of our phone records feels like just more of the same. It is indeed an outrage, that the big phone companies serve customers so poorly and the authorities so cravenly, that the so-called war on terrorism is so ineptly waged that billions of pages of numbers seemed like a useful tool. We can never forget that these were the same folks who intercepted two messages from Afghanistan on Sept. 10, 2001: "the match begins tomorrow" and "tomorrow is zero hour." No one understood except in hindsight, but hindsight was the only way the messages were seen. They weren't translated until Sept. 12, and zero hour had come and gone.

When it was reported recently that the Social Security numbers of more than 26 million veterans were up for grabs after someone stole the laptop of a government employee, it turned out that the theft was the old-fashioned kind, a jimmied window, a snatch-and-grab. But lots of current burglary is cybertech stuff, pulling ATM numbers off convenience-store computers, hacking into databases loaded with personal information. If these were conventional household crimes, the thieves could say truthfully that the doors and windows were left open, the loot in plain sight. That's what Americans do every day. It seems quaint to think of Orwell's futuristic novel and its warning that Big Brother was watching. Now 1984 is the past, not the future, and things have changed. There are many big brothers watching out there, and we're vamping for them every day. Sometimes in our underwear.
GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

For this exam, use ink, write legibly on every other line of your paper, and use only one side of each page. You may use a dictionary, an electronic speller, and a thesaurus.

Print your instructor's name in the upper right corner of this page. Print your own name on the back of the last page of your essay. Turn in your copy of "Your Mother's Maiden Name" along with your written exam and this sheet. Failure to follow directions will disqualify your exam.

ESSAY FORMAT

Your assignment is to write a 500-700 word essay addressing the prompt given below. This essay must include an introductory paragraph, several central paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph. The first paragraph must identify the author of the article and provide a clear and identifiable thesis statement. Each central paragraph must be based on a topic sentence that supports your thesis and that is developed from a variety of methods, such as explanation and elaboration, facts, quotations, examples, and references to authority. The concluding paragraph must bring the essay to a satisfactory close.

PROMPT

"Your Mother's Maiden Name"

In the essay "Your Mother's Maiden Name," author Anna Quindlen looks at how changes in our society have led to a decrease in the amount of privacy and security that we have in our personal lives. As she notes at one point in her essay, "no one is agitated because the notion of privacy has become, like Atlantis, a persistent and attractive myth. The sad thing is that that's not so much because the government has invaded our privacy, but because we thoughtlessly gave it away bit by bit." What do you think people can do to avoid this problem of "giving away" our privacy by sharing too much of our personal information?

FINAL NOTE

Remember that your general goal is to demonstrate to the reader of your essay that you have understood what you have read and that you have reacted sensitively and intelligently to it. Your specific goal is to write a well-constructed essay of the sort you have been studying and practicing all semester.