

# **Broken Promises of Privacy: Responding to the Surprising Failure of Data Anonymization**

**By Paul Ohm**

Two recent, newsworthy events have upended our understanding of the privacy-protecting power of anonymization, the name for techniques for protecting the privacy of individuals in large databases by deleting information like names and social security numbers. America Online and Netflix each released millions of anonymized records containing the secrets of hundreds of thousands of users. In both cases, to the surprise of many, researchers were able to “deanonymize” or “reidentify” some of the people in the data with ease.

By studying events like these, computer scientists have recently taken giant strides in developing theories and techniques of anonymization and reidentification. What do these advances in computer science, none of which has been comprehensively imported into legal scholarship until now, mean for law and policy? This Article argues that these advances should do no less than reshape every privacy law and revolutionize every privacy policy debate.