

Facebook says it should have audited Cambridge Analytica

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IN this Jan. 22, 2018 file photo, Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg attends a meeting with France's President Emmanuel Macron, during the "Choose France" summit, at the Chateau de Versailles, outside Paris. Sandberg says Facebook should have conducted an audit after learning that a political consultancy's improperly accessed user data nearly three years ago. The company's chief operating officer told NBC's Today show, Friday, April 6, that Facebook is now undertaking that audit. Sandberg said that at the time, Facebook received legal assurances that Cambridge Analytica had deleted the improperly obtained information.(AP Photo/Thibault Camus, Pool, File)

Facebook's No. 2 executive says the company should have conducted an audit after learning that a political consultancy improperly accessed user data nearly three years ago.

Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg told NBC's "Today" show that at the time, Facebook received legal assurances that Cambridge Analytica had deleted the improperly obtained information.

"What we didn't do is the next step of an audit and we're trying to that now," she said.

The audit of Cambridge Analytica is on hold, in deference to a U.K. investigation. But Facebook has been conducting a broader review of its own practices and how other third-party apps use data.

In addition, Facebook announced on Friday that it will require advertisers who want to run not just political ads, but also or so called "issue ads" —which may not endorse specific candidates or parties but discuss political topics— to be verified.

Facebook is trying to strengthen its system ahead of this year's U.S. midterm elections as well as upcoming elections around the world. Facebook has already required political ads to verify who is paying for them and where the advertiser is located. The issue ads requirement is new.

Facebook will also require the administrators of pages with a "large number" of followers to also be verified. The company did not say what this number would be. The move is intended to clamp down on fake pages and accounts that were used to disrupt the 2016 presidential elections in the U.S.

Facebook says page administrators and advertisers will be verified by

being asked to provide a government-issued ID. To verify addresses, it will mail a postcard with a unique code that the recipient can then enter into Facebook. This is similar to how Airbnb and other services verify addresses.

The company is facing a global backlash over the improper data-sharing scandal. Hearings over the issue are scheduled in the U.S., and the European Union is considering what actions to take against the company.

Sandberg also told NBC that if users were able to opt out of being shown ads, "at the highest level, that would be a paid product." This does not mean the company is planning to let users do this. Zuckerberg has made similar statements in the past, but has added that Facebook remains committed to offering a free service paid for by advertising.

Facebook users can opt out of seeing targeted ads, but can't shut off ads altogether. Neither can they opt entirely out of Facebook's data collection.

Sandberg gave several interviews this week as Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg prepares to testify before Congress next week, where the issue of elections meddling is almost certain to come up.

Facebook is also facing an investigation by the Federal Trade Commission in what's become its worst privacy crisis in its 14-year history.

It started with revelations that Cambridge Analytica, a data-mining firm, improperly accessed the private information of tens of millions of users to try to influence elections around the world. Over the past three weeks the scandal continued to spiral. For one, Facebook executives took nearly five days to respond to the Cambridge Analytica reports.

Then, some users who logged in to Facebook through Android devices discovered that Facebook had been collecting information about phone calls they made and text messages they sent. Facebook also acknowledged this week that nearly all of its 2.2 billion users may have had their public data scraped by "malicious actors" it did not name.

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