

As Facebook faces fire, heat turns up on No. 2 Sandberg

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In this Sept. 5, 2018, file photo Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg testifies before the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on 'Foreign Influence Operations and Their Use of Social Media Platforms' on Capitol Hill in Washington. For the past decade, Sandberg has been the poised, reliable second-in-command to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, helping steer Facebook's rapid growth around the world, while also cultivating her brand in ways that hint at aspirations well beyond the social network. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana, File)

For the past decade, Sheryl Sandberg has been the poised, reliable second-in-command to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, helping steer Facebook's rapid growth around the world, while also cultivating her brand in ways that hint at aspirations well beyond the social network.

But with growing criticism over the company's practices, or lack of oversight, her carefully cultivated image as an eloquent feminist leader is showing cracks. Questions these days aren't so much about whether she'll run for the Senate or even president, but whether she ought to keep her job at Facebook.

"Her brand was being manicured with the same resources and care as the gardens of Tokyo," said Scott Galloway, a New York University marketing professor. "And unfortunately a hurricane has come through the garden."

Facebook has been dealing with hurricanes for the past two years : fake news, elections interference, hate speech, a privacy scandal, the list goes on. The company's response—namely, Zuckerberg's and Sandberg's—has been slow at best, misleading and obfuscating at worst, as The New York Times reported last week. That report, and one from The Wall Street Journal , underscored Sandberg's influence at the company, even as Zuckerberg has borne much of the criticism and anger. There have been calls for both to be ousted.

But because of the way Facebook is set up, firing Zuckerberg would be all but impossible. He controls the majority of the company's voting stock, serves as its chairman and has—at least publicly—the support of its board of directors. Essentially, he'd have to fire himself. Firing Sandberg would be the next logical option to hold a high-level executive accountable. Though the chances are slim, the fact that it has even come up shows the extent of Facebook's—and Sandberg's—troubles.

Zuckerberg indicated Sandberg's job is secure in an interview televised by CNN late Tuesday. "She has been an important partner for me for 10 years," Zuckerberg said. "I am really proud of the work we have done together and hope we work together for decades more to come."

He also told CNN he intends to remain Facebook's chairman, despite intensifying pressure from some investors who believe he should relinquish that role. "I am certainly not currently thinking that that makes sense," he said.



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As chief operating officer, Sandberg is in charge of Facebook's business dealings, including the ads that make up the bulk of the company's revenue. She steered Facebook from a rising tech startup into a viable global business expected to reap \$55 billion in revenue this year. The company is second only to Google in digital advertising.

But she's also gotten the blame when things go wrong, including Facebook's failure to spot Russian attempts to influence U.S. elections by buying U.S. political ads—in rubles. Though Sandberg has denied knowing that Facebook hired an opposition research firm to discredit activists, she created a permissive environment through what the Times called an "aggressive lobbying campaign" against critics. Facebook fired the firm, Definers, after the Times report came out.

Sandberg, 49, who was hired away from Google in 2008, has been a crucial "heat shield" for Zuckerberg, as Galloway put it, as lawmakers and the public crank up criticism of the 34-year-old founder. In September, Facebook sent Sandberg to testify before the Senate intelligence committee, eliciting a warmer response than her boss did three months before.

Sandberg, former chief of staff for treasury secretary Larry Summers, appears more comfortable in Washington meeting rooms than Zuckerberg, who can seem robotic. Her profile is high enough that lawmakers don't feel stilted when she shows up. She's written (with help) two books, including 2013's "Lean In" about women and leadership. Her second book, "Plan B," is about dealing with loss and grief after her husband died unexpectedly. She was the lone chief operating officer among a who's who of tech CEOs—including Apple's Tim Cook and Amazon's Jeff Bezos—to meet with Donald Trump a month after his election.

"It's both who she is and how bereft Silicon Valley is of strong, powerful

female voices," crisis management expert Richard Levick said. "She has positioned herself as one of those strong voices with 'Lean In.'"

But her high profile also makes her more susceptible to criticism.

The chorus for Sandberg to leave is getting louder. CNBC commentator Jim Cramer predicted Monday that Facebook's stock would rise if Sandberg leaves or gets fired. NYU's Galloway believes both Sandberg and Zuckerberg should be fired for allowing Facebook to turn into an entity that harms democracy around the world.



In this Jan. 17, 2017, file photo, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg, delivers a speech during the visit of a start-up companies gathering at Paris' Station F in Paris. For the past decade, Sheryl Sandberg has been the poised, reliable second-in-command to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, helping steer Facebook's rapid growth around the world, while also cultivating her brand in ways that hint at aspirations well beyond the social network. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus, File)

"Every day executives are fired for a fraction of infractions these two have committed," he said.

Besides elections interference, Zuckerberg and Sandberg have been criticized for their slow response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which the data-mining firm accessed millions of users' private information without their permission. The pair were silent for days after the news came out. According to the Journal, Zuckerberg told Sandberg this spring that he blamed her and her teams for the "public fallout" over Cambridge Analytica. Citing unnamed sources, the newspaper said Sandberg at one point wondered if she should be worried about her job (though that appears to no longer be the case, based on Zuckerberg's public support).

Galloway said it would look bad for Facebook to fire one of the only top female executives in an industry where women "face inordinately high obstacles to get to leadership positions."

Beyond that, Sandberg has also been a positive force on Facebook. She was hired to be the "adult" in the room and has filled that role well. She moves comfortably outside tech circles and in public speaking, countering Zuckerberg's shortcomings in that area.

If anything, Sandberg's departure from Facebook would likely be on her own terms. While Zuckerberg has spent all of his adult life at Facebook, Sandberg had a career before Facebook and even tech, so it is plausible that she would have a life after Facebook, perhaps back in politics.

But first, she has Facebook's own troubles to deal with. The task seems daunting because its problems might never go away . But Levick believes Sandberg can begin to restore her image by acknowledging her role in

causing Facebook's problems instead of blaming external forces beyond her control: "The kneejerk response 'poor, poor me' is not the solution."

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