

Facebook developer conference kicks off amid scandal

1 May 2018, by Barbara Ortutay And Michael Liedtke



In this April 10, 2018, file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg testifies before a joint hearing of the Commerce and Judiciary Committees on Capitol Hill in Washington about the use of Facebook data to target American voters in the 2016 election. Zuckerberg will kick off F8, the company's annual conference for software developers, Tuesday, May 1, in San Jose, California, having a fresh opportunity to apologize for Facebook's privacy scandal and to sketch out Facebook's future. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

A year ago, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was dazzling thousands of software developers with the prospect of augmented reality features that could let people spruce up apartments with digital art.

This year, things might be different.

The company's annual F8 conference kicks off Tuesday in San Jose, California, following a year of fake news, privacy scandals, congressional testimony, Russia investigations and apologies. Facing the startups, software developers and other tech folks who are normally some of Facebook's biggest fans, Zuckerberg will have a chance both to apologize again for the company's missteps—and to talk about where things go from here.

If his recent statements are any indication, Zuckerberg will probably mention that Facebook must take a "broader view" of its responsibility in the world, emphasize the value of the Facebook "community" and hint that Facebook's efforts to fix things will be good for everyone—users, developers, Facebook itself, and even the world.

Zuckerberg also might recap some of the privacy-related changes Facebook has made in recent weeks, including new restrictions on user data apps can have access to. Facebook also might unveil additional changes.

It's been six weeks since the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke, revealing that the political data-mining firm inappropriately accessed the information of as many as 87 million Facebook users. Facebook has been doing damage control ever since.

For Zuckerberg, that's meant repeated apologies to users and lawmakers, two days of congressional questioning about whether and how the company protects its users' privacy. For Facebook, it's also meant further limiting the data developers can access and how long they can access it; several audits; and the suspension of apps suspected of violating Facebook's rules around user privacy.

One such app maker, Cubeyou, says it was wrongfully suspended without warning and remains suspended despite having provided evidence that it didn't sell or misuse people's data.

The problem, Cubeyou CEO Federico Treu said, is that Facebook is "so big and so important" that it can cut off anyone from its service with no consequence. Cubeyou has about 30 employees; Facebook, nearly 28,000.

At F8 this year, Treu expects lots of questions about the future of Facebook's relationship with developers. Instead of owning up to its faults, he

said, Facebook is "trying to put the focus on bad developers, bad advertisers" and the Russians.

Facebook did not immediately respond to a message for comment on Cubeyou on Monday.

Zuckerberg is also likely to talk up new stuff, including AR and virtual reality. For instance, Facebook could use the conference to release a portable headset designed to turn the so far geeky realm of virtual reality into a mass phenomenon. Zuckerberg announced the \$199 device, called the Oculus Go, six months ago without specifying when it would go on sale.

Oculus, a VR company Facebook acquired in 2014, already sells a more expensive VR headset called the Rift. But that device needs to be tethered to a personal computer. That restraint, coupled with a \$399 price tag and the cost for a PC to power the device, is one of the reasons VR so far has mainly appealed to lovers of video games who want to play in three-dimensional artificial worlds.

Facebook is counting on the Oculus Go to widen the audience for VR. Last year, Zuckerberg described his strategy for using VR to reshape the way people interact and experience life, much as the company's social network already has. His goal is to have 1 billion people immersed in VR on Oculus headsets at some indeterminate point in the future.

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