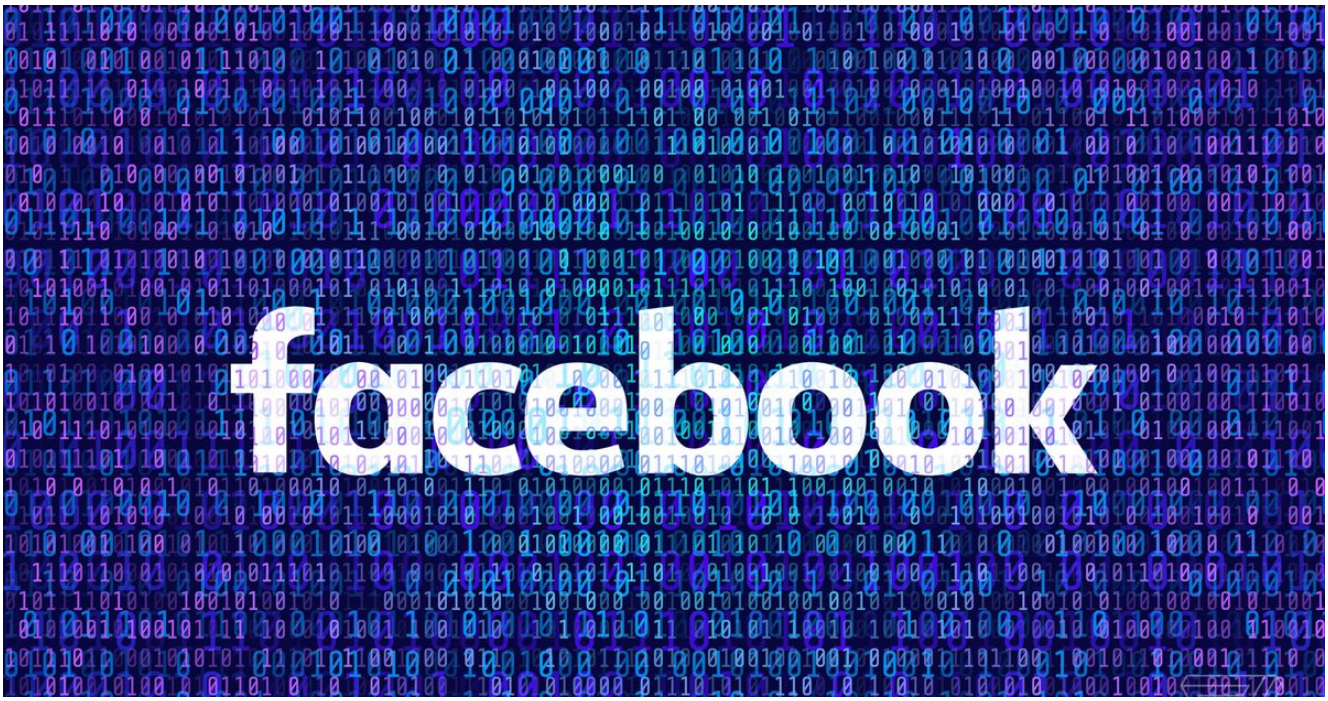
As controversy swirls, Facebook dials down the swagger on its developer conference



Type with your brain. “Hear” with your skin. And in the event of an emergency, here’s a helicopter to the rescue with some free internet access. The marquee announcements of last year’s F8 developer conference found Facebook at the peak of its ambition, as Mark Zuckerberg and other top executives sketched out a vision in which Facebook delivered bleeding-edge technology powered by state-of-the-art artificial intelligence and a thriving developer ecosystem.

Then the person leading the brain-typing and skin-hearing efforts quit the company after 18 months, the Cambridge Analytica scandal caused public trust in Facebook to plunge, and the company scrambled to shut down wide swathes of its developer platform. Plans to unveil a home speaker at F8 were reportedly canceled at the last minute over fears that it would further roil a public already skeptical of Facebook’s

data collection practices.

The bruising series of events leading up to F8 is expected to produce a more muted affair than in previous years. (Much of the event had to be reworked in recent weeks after the company began shutting down APIs, people familiar with the matter told *The Verge*.) On one hand, the event, which takes places Tuesday and Wednesday in San Jose, is still very much on. Facebook says it's the biggest F8 ever, with more than 50 sessions available to a record crowd of 5,000 attendees.

But the company acknowledges that the event comes at a time when Facebook is radically rethinking its relationship with those developers. "We'll always make the important platform changes, trying to strike the right balance between creating compelling social experiences, protecting people's data, and supporting an innovative developer ecosystem," said Ime Archibong, vice president for product partnerships at Facebook, in an email. "These changes can be disruptive. But Facebook developers are incredible partners and help us ensure the platform enables experiences that are both social and safe."

It remains to be see whether the company will get a warm reception from partners who have been blindsided by the changes.

Justin Krause runs a startup named Pod that builds a smart calendar app for iOS. Until this month, the app integrated with Facebook to put events from the social app onto your calendar. Then, in the wake of this month's Congressional hearings, Facebook revoked Pod's access to the calendar API without warning.

"They didn't announce that they were revoking this data or send errors – they just started sending empty lists, silently," Krause said. "We found out things were broken when users wrote in, and then we had to hustle to get a fix into

the App Store (which takes time, because Apple has to approve it)."

Krause said the move had left him uncertain whether his company would bother working with Facebook in the future. "We were really proud of our first-class Facebook events integration, but we'll think twice about investing time into Facebook's platform in the future – if we get the opportunity to do so," he said.

Anjney Midha, co-founder of an augmented reality company named Ubiquity 6, told me he was skipping F8 for the first time in years. The original vision for developers on F8 – that they could plug into the company's social graph to rapidly grow their own businesses – is greatly diminished, he said. "That whole promise is gone," Midha said. "It feels like you've got to pack your bags and move on to somewhere else."

The official schedule for F8 suggests several areas where Facebook continues to court developers: virtual reality, where it needs developers to invest in its Oculus platform; gaming, which it has shoehorned into Facebook Messenger; and Workplace, its version of Facebook for businesses.

On Tuesday, Zuckerberg will kick off the event with a keynote address that is expected to address the scandals of the past year and focus on Facebook's responsibility to the world. Wednesday's keynote is expected to be center on future directions for Facebook, sources said.

The company also appears ready to address at least some of the scandals of the past year. There is a session on "Authenticity and Quality in the News Feed," for example, and on "Helping High Quality News Thrive on Facebook." The sessions also demonstrate Facebook's embrace of emerging markets, which sessions devoted to building technology products in India and other countries. (There's also an intriguing one called "How the Sharing Economy Developed in China and Beyond," featuring

a Beijing bicycle-sharing company. Facebook can’t operate in China, but desperately wants to.)

Of course, F8 isn’t only about developers. It also offers Facebook a chance to shift the spotlight away from its failings. The company is as ambitious as ever, and we should expect to hear more about where it’s investing: in AI, in augmented reality and VR, in global internet access, and in consumer hardware, among other areas.

Other questions hanging over the event: will Zuckerberg address Cambridge Analytica on stage? (Probably.) Will we hear an update on hearing with our skin? (Even odds.) Will Facebook throw caution to the wind and show off its home speaker anyway? (Probably not.)

In any case, it promises to be Facebook’s strangest developer conference ever — it’s the only one to be held in the midst of a massive API shutdown. Facebook will still give the world plenty to talk about this week — but it’s unclear that it’s going to give developers much that’s interesting to build.

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