

Sheryl Sandberg, back in Miami, says Facebook overlooked potential for abuse

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DECEMBER 18, 2018 09:19 AM,

UPDATED 11 HOURS 39 MINUTES AGO



Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg speaks about the importance of small businesses during her visit to Miami on Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2018. *MARIA ALEJANDRA CARDONA FOR THE MIAMI HERALD*

Proclaiming Miami the city that “shaped who [she is] today,” Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg was back in her hometown this week to kick off Facebook’s small business program and catch up with friends and family.

Sandberg, who graduated from North Miami Beach High School in 1987, spoke Tuesday morning at the James L. Knight Center to launch the [Miami edition of](#)

Miami Herald

[the Facebook Community Boost](#) program. The program is designed to teach entrepreneurs in 50 U.S. cities how to promote their businesses via Facebook.

Her visit comes as Facebook experiences the worst crisis in its 15-year history. Its [stock price has dropped 35 percent](#) from mid-year highs over claims it enabled a Russia-backed troll campaign during the 2016 election. Late Tuesday, the [New York Times](#) reported that Facebook's sharing of customer data was far more widespread than previously known. Just a few weeks earlier, another [New York Times investigation](#) revealed Facebook had paid for opposition research on George Soros and other critics, in an operation [linked to Sandberg](#). A government [report](#) released Monday has prompted further criticism, revealing Russia-sponsored hackers also tapped Facebook-owned Instagram to sow disinformation, especially among African Americans.

Tuesday, [Bloomberg](#) reported that 31 civil rights groups have called for Sandberg and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to resign from Facebook's board. The nonprofit groups include MoveOn, the Southern Poverty Law Center and the National LGBTQ Task Force.

Briefly addressing the controversy Tuesday before a packed auditorium downtown, Sandberg acknowledged 2018 had been the most challenging year the company has yet faced.

"We are not the same company we were before [the] 2016 [election]," she said.

She said Facebook had not focused enough on the ways the social media platform could be abused. In response, she said, Facebook is now making "massive" investments to guard against the spread of misinformation and misuse of user data. The company is working more closely with governments and law enforcement agencies, she said.

Sandberg declined to respond to questions from a Miami Herald reporter.

At Tuesday's event, Facebook announced it is partnering with Miami Dade College to launch a college-credit certificate program in digital marketing — one of 20 schools around the country offering a similar program. Facebook also is giving \$125,000 to the Miami Bayside Foundation for microloans to small minority-owned businesses.

The event was packed with more than 600 enthusiastic Facebook users undeterred by the controversies. Lonielle Freeman, 34, works full time as a registered dietician but is considering starting her own business. She attended Sandberg's event and another session on how Instagram stories can be used to promote a business's brand.

She said she appreciated that Facebook was making so many resources available for free to Miamians. She came away convinced that the company was committed to correcting its errors. Sandberg in particular made a strong case for giving the company another chance, she said.

"It's about trust," Freeman said. "They're saying, 'Come take this journey with us and give us another try.'"

On Monday, Sandberg was the guest of the Miami chapter of [Lean In Latinas](#), part of Sandberg's [Lean In](#) initiative. The group's director of marketing, Gabriela Reyes, 26, said Sandberg and the broader Lean In network had inspired her through its principle of self-empowerment to organize Monday's Sandberg event itself, though she's only been involved with the group for a few months.

Even if Sandberg's position at Facebook were to change, Reyes said, her faith in the Lean In philosophy would not be shaken.

"The Lean In community started with a book, and it's evolved, so that is the part I'm attached to," Reyes said. "There's been a passing of the baton of leadership

that has made it to my hands here. None of [the recent controversies] has changed my opinion or respect of what the Lean In foundation is doing.”



Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg visits Miami Tuesday, Dec. 18, 2018, as part of Facebook's Community Boost program. *MARIA ALEJANDRA CARDONA FOR THE MIAMI HERALD*



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