**44th session of the Human Rights Council**

**Panel discussion on the impacts, opportunities and challenges of new and emerging digital technologies with regard to the promotion and protection of human rights**

**Opening statement by Nada Al-Nashif**

**United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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Madame President,

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Colleagues and friends,

I am pleased to open this panel addressing both the opportunities and challenges that new and emerging digital technologies present to human rights. I thank all of you for your time and commitment to the issues at hand.

As we are all aware, these technologies have made it possible for us to share this discussion today, even if it means the middle of the night to some of our panellists.

Digital technologies increasingly permeate all aspects of our lives and societies, transforming our health care, education, work, human rights activism, political participation, development and virtually all sectors of every economy.

It is becoming a cliché to say how transformative they are, serving as a double-edged sword that may either lead to our collective human flourishing – or to our collective demise.

But that makes it no less true. Furthermore: how these technologies are developed, used, and governed will be crucial in determining which way that balance tips.

COVID-19 has made us even more reliant on digital technologies. In that regard – and in all else -- the pandemic is a striking reminder of existing inequalities, and the consequences of those inequalities for human rights.

The work of the Council in this area is extremely relevant: artificial intelligence and advances in biotechnology are, for example, key to the development of a COVID-19 vaccine, which must be viewed as a global public good.

At the same time, there are risks. The use of AI to process bank loan applications, for instance, may lead to discrimination against individuals from already marginalized communities.

Indeed, the many examples of both benefits and threats are there to be seen.

AI may assist in boosting crop production, promoting food security, and reducing carbon emissions, among many other efforts towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. On the other hand, we have also witnessed AI-powered mass disinformation campaigns intervening in political processes.

Facial recognition may help reunite families who have lost their children while fleeing conflict; but the same technology is already being used to monitor peaceful protests and to identify those participating. The potential chilling effect of such practices on the freedoms of assembly and expression cannot be overestimated. Our recent report on peaceful protests provides recommendations on the use of facial recognition technology, including a call for a moratorium on its use until at least certain minimum requirements are met.

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

We need urgent guidance to shape governance in these and other areas where the use of digital technology is rapidly spreading and influencing our societies, our rights, and human agency itself.

There is no doubt that the positive potential of digital technologies is enormous. But to help companies and Governments address the daunting challenges they also bring, the human rights framework is essential. In parallel, this Council and its mandate holders have a determinant role to play in depicting how human rights law, standards and principles apply in the digital space.

I commend the impressive research, guidance, and advocacy already carried out by the Special Procedures in this domain and encourage all to take full advantage of this important work; but we know there is much more that must be done, and as soon as possible.

I encourage the Council to tackle some of the more pressing and complex issues related to society’s increasing reliance on data-intensive technologies, for example in social protection systems, as policing tools or at the borders. The multifaceted threats to the civic space, from online attacks to digital surveillance, also require increased attention. The COVID-19 crisis has also laid bare how essential is the internet to our daily lives, therefore we should all pay more attention to the growing number of internet shutdowns and how they deeply affect human rights and development.

I trust this Panel discussion and the forthcoming report of the Advisory Committee on new and emerging digital technologies will help you and all stakeholders further develop the Council’s future digital agenda. I look forward to Mr. Soh’s update on the work of the Advisory Committee.

Cooperation is, once again, crucial.

As the United Nations, Member States, companies and civil society, the question of ***how*** we address these challenges will be fundamental in determining the outcomes of our efforts.

In looking for solutions and developing guidance, we need to continue to break down silos. We need to ensure that civil society, academia, and the private sector are fully included in all fora discussing governance frameworks, legislation, and regulation for the development and deployment of digital tech.

An inclusive, multi-stakeholder approach, will be essential in the efforts of this Council and other fora. A remarkable example of such approach is the one adopted by the Secretary-General in High-Level Panel on Digital Cooperation and his recent roadmap for implementing the Panel’s recommendations.

Other UN-led efforts, such as those addressing digital identification and combating terrorism in the digital space, should also follow this example to increase the participation of diverse stakeholders, including from civil society. I wish to mention in particular UNESCO’s leadership in elaborating the first global standard-setting instrument on the ethics of AI with multi-stake holder consultations to define shared values and principles and identity concrete policy measures on the Ethics of AI.

Moreover, the Secretary-General’s RoadMap provides us with a collective guide to ensure digital technologies better serve humanity and support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is crucial that we lead by example.

Earlier this year, during the last session of this Council, the Secretary-General made a Call to Action stressing that ‘within the United Nations, human rights must be fully considered in all decision-making, oper­ations and institutional commitments’.

We must apply human rights due diligence to all of our policies, operations and decision-making, including those related to the use of data and digital technologies.

I look forward to this panel’s discussion and to strengthening our collaboration towards the ambitious results, we have jointly targeted.

Thank you.