Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much for organizing this very important discussion and for inviting me to speak today.

The entire humanity is now falling victim to our global digital success. Humans are no longer in full control of content distribution in the digital space – we have given large parts of this control to algorithms. And algorithms were not designed with moral and ethical principles at their core; the primary considerations were user engagement and clickability, because this is what generates profit.

That’s why algorithms filter and amplify for us the content that will keep us engaged for the longest possible time. They feed our digital addiction. If you don’t believe it, try not opening Google and your social media for a week.

Why does it matter for our today’s discussion?

Because this digital reality makes it frighteningly easy to prey on people’s uncertainties, anxieties and lack of information, on a scale never seen before. To frame the debate around repeated appeals to our most primal emotions such as fear, turning them into anger and blame. To spread and amplify hate speech and associated disinformation, peddling negative stereotypes and conspiracy theories that incite hatred leading to violence. To scapegoat and stigmatize individuals and entire groups.

None of this is new. For years, people have voiced concerns about the widespread use of social media platforms and digital technologies to disseminate hate, leading to discrimination, violence and killings. The plight of the Rohingya people is perhaps the most striking example but there are hundreds of others. Through human interaction augmented by algorithms, through bots and conversational artificial intelligence, hate spreads now like a virus, poisoning the political narrative, drawing in both likeminded and unsuspecting individuals and disproportionately reinforcing - and, for some, normalizing - the message of intolerance.

What’s been happening during the COVID-19 pandemic is just a magnified version of this reality. In our recent report about the effects of “states of emergency,” introduced during the pandemic, on democracy and human rights, we saw all these symptoms amplified. And we saw that people in marginalized or vulnerable situations, such as ethnic, national and religious minorities, migrants and refugees, are particularly affected.

Violence and killings do not appear out of nowhere. At ODIHR we say that hate crimes are “message crimes”: they are a manifestation of hatred and discrimination against the group or community to which the victim belongs or is perceived to belong. It’s like Marian Turski said in his famous speech at the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz: violence creeps up word by word, step by step, comes closer, until what has been unthinkable before becomes a deadly reality.

In the political science, there is a concept named the Overton Window, or the window of political discourse. At the center of the window are mainstream ideas, socially acceptable political lines and policies. At the outer edges sit radical lines of debate that are starting to permeate small sections of society. And outside the window - the things that are socially unspeakable.

When hate speech is aired publicly, it becomes normalized. The Overton window - the range of ideas tolerated in public discourse - shifts. When white supremacists call for violence against people of color, then more moderate, subtle forms of racism appear somewhat reasonable in comparison. A recent study from Poland found that exposure to hostile online content against specific minority groups increases prejudices of people – because it desensitizes them. When key political figures speak about banning Muslims from their countries, compare refugees to a plague and announce the creation of LGBT-free zones, the internet, built to reward engagement and clickability over accuracy, shifts the Overton window quickly, and the socially unspeakable becomes mainstream. We're on a path to digital dystopia.

The universal human right to freedom of opinion and expression should compliment and reinforce other human rights to safeguard the core values of non-discrimination. But we see that human rights no longer advance together as part of a single indivisible and interrelated framework. Freedom of expression is far too often abused to stir up hatred and destroy other rights and freedoms.

Some people say that a response to all this is more state control of the digital space. But, in absence of a clear, internationally agreed definition of hate speech, the perennial debates about the boundaries between free expression and content control are unlikely to bring a solution. In this void, tech companies have an unconstrained power to decide what content is harmful and what is not, without any legal accountability for how their decisions affect the rights and freedoms of billions of people.

There are others who say that digital companies need more self-regulation. But we all know now that various voluntary mechanisms attempted so far have not worked as they should. There’s an old saying in the law: “Your liberty to swing your fist ends just where my nose begins.” It basically conveys the principle that your right to exercise whatever “liberty” you think you’re entitled to ends when it threatens my life and safety. Measured against this principle, tech companies’ answers to racial and ethnic hate, conspiracy theories and alt-right violence that roam across their platforms and lead to people being killed are highly inadequate and irresponsible.

In my opinion, what we need to prioritize is building a system of shared responsibility - of state institutions, businesses, international and civil society organizations, academia and others - for the inclusive oversight of tech companies and for dealing with the misuse and abuse of digital space for propagating hate.

What we also need to prioritize is a massive investment in educating people in emotional intelligence, critical and analytical thinking and digital literacy, starting from early age and using all formal and informal channels. Only with such an investment, we will be able to build people’s resilience to the virus of hate speech, and counter insensitivity and complacency.

Because, as Marian Turski said in Auschwitz, if people become insensitive and complacent, before we know it, some kind of Auschwitz will suddenly appear from nowhere, and befall us and our descendants.