PANEL FOUR – SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CRISIS: CASE STUDIES

Introduction
Case studies can often provide meaningful takeaways and important lessons for practitioners. For this reason the final panel of the Workshop was dedicated to analysing actual case studies from Malaysia, Singapore and Australia.

Social Media as a Mobilisation Tool: The Malaysian Experience with regard to Bersih

In her presentation, Surinderpal Kaur discussed the ways and the extent to which social media was used as a tool for mobilisation and support-generation for the Bersih rallies in Malaysia. She first provided the background to Bersih, which was a loose coalition of NGOs and organisations that came together to demand clean, fair and free elections.

The first Bersih rally was held in 2007, and this was followed by a much bigger rally in 2011, which came to be known as Bersih 2.0. Its success led to the organisation of Bersih 3.0 in 2012. Bersih 3.0 was better organised but more complex as the Green movement and the opposition parties had decided to get involved. Nevertheless, the main demands of Bersih remained more or less unchanged: (a) cleaning of the electoral roll; (b) reformation of the postal ballot; (c) using indelible ink; (d) free and fair access to media; (e) minimum 21 days of campaign period; (f) strengthening public institutions; (g) stopping corruption; and (h) stopping dirty politics.

Kaur argued that Bersih, as a collective body, operated more at the meso (middle) level in terms of mobilisation. This involved articulating the issue, setting out a course of action and launching mobilisation efforts. A mix of traditional resources and social media were used in the mobilisation efforts, e.g. news releases, leaflets, word-of-mouth promotions, press conferences in conjunction with websites and Facebook.

Bersih soon attracted a strong global following, with protests organised in 35 countries. Global Bersih was subsequently launched with an official website and Facebook page that provided detailed instructions on how Malaysians abroad could organise rallies in their cities. Thus, social media and the internet served as mediums for mobilisation and broadcasting in that they served to ‘spread the word’ amongst Malaysians abroad and locally, as well as encouraged Malaysians to join the protests. This largely changed the dynamics of social mobilisation and activism in Malaysia.

Kaur believed that social media provided enormous leverage for the Bersih rallies. The speed and interactivity of social media provided the means for broadcast and mobilisation to occur. Social media used alongside other more traditional resources for mobilisation was highly effective. The cross-over effects from traditional media and various social media platforms provided greater leverage, and the availability of social media as a resource and the efficacy of actors in using social media effectively was critical to the successful use of social media as a tool for mobilisation.