

1. The hint has long been a major constituent of communication between human beings. Hints abound in the literature of the past; such as the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. At the present time, the preoccupation of writers of all lands with the hint is demonstrated continually in films, plays, comedy programmes and advertisements. Yet these writings reflect but palely the everyday uses of the hint by individuals, which can reach heights of sophistication with degrees of spontaneity unattainable in mass entertainment and influence.

2. It is surprising in view of its longevity and universality that virtually nothing has been published on such a highly significant aspect of communication. This paper explores, perhaps for the first time, the nature of the hint, categorises various types, discusses a number of methods of hinting and considers its purposes and effects, especially in relation to values such as privacy and freedom.

Definitions

3. As is normal with human artefacts, there is no generally agreed definition of "hint", noun or verb.

Dictionary definitions:

- a slight or barely perceivable indication
- a suggestion conveyed covertly but intelligibly
- an indirect or summary suggestion
- a subtle pointing out
- a statement saying by implication what is preferred not to say explicitly
- a slight indication of the existence or nature of something
- a subtle quality underlying or felt to underlie a situation, action or person.

Synonyms include:

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| - clue | - intimation | - inkling | - undertone |
| - cue | - implication | - innuendo | - suspicion |

4. The general notions conveyed by these definitions and synonyms are of indirectness, incompleteness and subtlety in communication - a kind of conveying of information in which there is a holding back. This gives some idea of the nature of the hint but in the context of its modern forms and usages a far more fundamental and sophisticated understanding is necessary. One of the major purposes of this paper is therefore to explore in some detail the nature of the hint. An intimation, indication or inkling of what follows may be obtained not only from the title but by noting that one authority states that the noun "hint" is probably an alteration of the obsolete "hent" which means "an act of seizing" while another considers that the verb is derived from the old English word "henten" with the meaning "to catch or pursue".

Communication Reference

5. In examining the nature of the hint it is helpful to set up a standard type of communication with which the hint and other forms may be compared. A useful starting point in postulating such a standard or reference is to consider the conveying of a message of some sort or other where the intention of the sender is that the message should be clearly and unambiguously understood by the recipient. It is a matter of common experience that however much it is desired that the message shall be clearly understood a number of deficiencies may frustrate the intention. For examples, the sender may misjudge what the recipient will understand, the medium through which transmission takes place may be faulty and the recipient may misread the message received.

6. It is in this connection that two-way communication is of great importance. The sender and recipient can exchange further information with a view to correcting faults or clarifying the message so that in the end the intention of the sender is fully realised. Clearly, in exchanges of views, negotiations, mutual persuasion and many other kinds of human interaction, more than two people may be involved and an extensive series of messages are sent or received. These can all be considered in terms of message sending from one person to another with subsequent two-way communication for the purpose of clarification of each message. In practice the message sending and the clarification purpose become merged (often to the detriment of clarification!) but the one-way message with a two way clarification process can be considered as a basic element in human communication.

7. In establishing a basic type of communication as a reference, openness is a key feature. In this context an open communication is one to which any member of the public has access and is capable of understanding the message conveyed.

8. Taking the above points into consideration, the reference type of communication which will be used to explore, heuristically, the nature of the hint is as follows:-

The one-way open sending of a message to be unambiguously understood by the recipient, this being assisted when necessary by open two-way messages for the purpose of clarification.

9. It may be noted at this stage that the reference type of communication can be used for perverse purposes. Thus, while a message may be conveyed clearly and be well understood, the message itself may be false, e.g. by containing errors of fact, introduced deliberately, negligently or accidentally. However, being an open or public communication acts as both an incentive to accuracy as well as facilitating the correction by others of falsehoods in the messages.

10. By examining several kinds of departure from the reference type of communication the nature of the hint becomes clearer.

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