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## ITV under fire for attack on teens

Ann Widdecombe's focus on a troubled estate was cheap TV, claim angry residents

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**Amelia Hill**, social affairs correspondent  
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ITV's flagship current affairs series, *Tonight With Trevor McDonald*, has been accused of deliberate misrepresentation in one of its programmes, 'Ann Widdecombe v The Hoodies'.

Sir Trevor McDonald has promised to investigate the complaints personally, after community leaders and a cross-party alliance of politicians in the north London borough of Islington said Widdecombe falsely depicted the Andover estate there as a 'dump' terrorised by gangs of out-of-control youngsters.

'Ann Widdecombe was basically out to get a specific story and, by hanging around at night time and shoving her camera into the faces of young people, demanding that they account for themselves, she made sure she got it,' said Terry Stacy, deputy leader of Islington council. 'It was a cheap way to demonise young people.'

Widdecombe, the Tory MP for Maidstone and the Weald, has refused to comment, but ITV gave a robust denial of the claims. The accusations, however, come as both it and the BBC are reeling from a string of incidents where programmes have apparently failed to apply satisfactory editorial control.

Widdecombe lived on the troubled Seventies-built Andover estate for three days when she filmed her documentary, screened last January. ITV insists the programme was a fair representation of her experiences. 'We wholeheartedly stand by the programme,

which was an entirely legitimate and balanced report into genuine concerns about anti-social behaviour from residents, many of whom had been victims of vandalism and threatening and abusive behaviour or had witnessed illegal activity such as violence and drug-taking,' said a spokesman for the channel.

'She reported on complaints that little was being done to tackle these problems by the authorities, and examined what is being done to steer young people away from activities which are illegal or which some residents find intimidating.'

After the documentary was screened, however, a cross-party group of councillors wrote to local papers to register their belief that Widdecombe had exaggerated conditions for the estate's residents and had provoked youths with the style of her questioning.

Backing these claims, London Councils, the organisation that represents all of the capital's councils, and the City of London and the Metropolitan Police Authority posted a condemnation of the programme on their website. Determined to tell their side of the story, an impromptu campaign group raised £7,000. They hired a film-maker and went into school every day for a fortnight during their holidays to make the 10-minute documentary. Since being posted on YouTube two weeks ago, Beyond The Hoodie has had more than 2,000 viewings.

Young people who appeared in Widdecombe's documentary said in the webfilm that they found the MP's tactics intimidating and her portrayal of them and their community misleading. 'I don't particularly like living here, but when I watched her programme I felt personally insulted because she only targeted the negative things,' said one young man.

'She approached the old people in daylight, in clubs where they felt relaxed, but when it came to us teenagers she waited until it was cold and dark and we were huddled in alleyways.

'When she first approached me with her huge entourage - bodyguards and camera crew - I felt intimidated because she barged up to me, shoved a camera in my face and started asking me to account for myself. Obviously I responded badly to that approach because that was what she'd intended.'

Widdecombe has refused to watch Beyond The Hoodie, which has been nominated for the Philip Lawrence Awards, which mark outstanding achievements in good citizenship by young people.

McDonald, however, has promised to not only view it, but to act on its concerns. 'I will relish watching this video as soon as I can and will follow up the young people's complaints,' he said.

'I take a very robust view of complaints from viewers and believe they must all be dealt with absolute thoroughness. It's a bit of a moral and philosophical point with me: if we ever get anything wrong or convey the wrong idea, we must acknowledge that. We must always rigidly take notice of what people say. I'm not saying anything has gone wrong in this case, but the complaints will be investigated in a serious way.'

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