Evaluate the view that the output of the media mainly reflects the interests of wealthy, powerful and influential groups in society. (20 marks)

Marxists are a group of sociologists who see society as being based on a conflict of interest between the proletariat and the more affluent bourgeoisie. "Marxists see the media as spreading a dominant ideology that justifies both the social advantages of wealthy, powerful and influential groups in society, and the disadvantages of those who lack wealth, power and influence"; pluralists challenge this view. Pluralism sees the exercise of power in society as reflecting a broad range of social interests, with power spread among a wide variety of competing groups and individuals, with no single one having a monopoly of power.

The Marxist view of mass media is that it plays an ideological role in maintaining a set of ideas and beliefs that represent the outlook and justifies the material interests of a particular social group. The ideological role of the media is concerned with the extent to which the media socialise audiences into a particular view of the world and the society in which they live, often manufacturing a consensus around some central set of values. Marxists believe that this is often thought to be achieved by the media producing messages that they expect audiences to respond to in a particular way. Morley, a Marxist sociologist, believes that the media produces a preferred or dominant reading of the news that the bourgeoisie would prefer their audiences to believe. This dominant ideology justifies the social advantages of wealthy, powerful and influential groups in society and justifies the disadvantages of the rest.

Marxist Althusser argues that this dominant ideology is spread through the rest of the population by the 'ideological state apparatuses' that are agencies like the media and the education system which seek to induce a false consciousness of their exploitation and real interests. This is achieved by persuading everyone to accept that we all benefit from the way society is organised and that it is fair, because persuading them and trying to obtain their consent is a more effective means of controlling the population than using force. Similarly, Marxists like Miliband and the Glasgow Media Group argue that through agenda setting, the media is able to control access to peoples knowledge of what is happening in society. They also suggest that the dominant message is one that justifies social divisions between rich and poor.

The instrumental approach is a traditional Marxist view that suggests that the media owners, such as Rupert Murdoch, directly control media content, and manipulate the content and media audiences to protect their profits, and spread the dominant ideology. Traditional marxists argue that there is a connection between media ownership and content in newspapers. Media owners benefit from the capitalist system and thus they can promote pro-capitalist views. Curran and Seaton found evidence which suggested media owners did interfere and manipulate newspaper content, at the expense of the independence of journalists and editors, to protect their own interests. There is substantial evidence to support their findings such as the fact that Rupert Murdoch owns 175 different newspapers, as well as Fox in the USA and Sky; they all reflect his personal political views.

However, a more recent, neo-marxist approach, is the Hegemonic approach which is particularly associated with the GMG. This approach suggests that the mass media spreads a dominant ideology that justifies and legitimises the power of the ruling class. Unlike the instrumentalist approach, it suggests that owners have some influence but rarely have direct day-to-day control of the content of the media, which is left in the hands of managers and journalists. Hegemony refers to the idea that through the spreading of the dominant ruling-class ideology, other social classes are persuaded to accept that the values and beliefs in that ideology are reasonable and normal, and form a consensus that becomes part of everyday common sense. They suggest that media managers and journalists tend to give some professional independence, an still generally support the dominant ideology, but by choice. The GMG points out that they have a set of professional values which suggests that the most reasonable and sensible explanations of events and the way they should be reported are those in keeping with the taken for-granted, common-sense assumptions of the dominant ideology.