

Freeze frame

By [Debra Bendis](#)

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I can't quit thinking about Yakub. In my purse I have a print clipping that includes a photo of the 12-year-old boy staring into the camera with a copy of Steve Jobs's biography held high over his head. I pull it out from time to time and imagine Yakub at work.

Yakub sells pirated English-language bestsellers on the streets of Mumbai. [According to Sonia Faleiro](#), Yakub works on the edge of Mumbai's busiest streets. He stands at the edge of the traffic snarls until a stoplight hits red, then races out among the vehicles brandishing a book in his hand and calling out its English title. If he's lucky a car will stop. Then a sedan window rolls down, a puff of cooled air escapes, and a hand reaches out with rupees in it. Yakub takes the money and hands over *Fifty Shades of Gray*, *Steve Jobs* or the latest book in the Game of Thrones series.

After darting in and out of traffic for a day, he reports to his "seth" (boss) and hands over his earnings. His seth pays him about \$2 per book (100 rupees) for an average of three books sold each day, and Yakub heads home to the slum dwelling that he shares with his parents. Because he makes more than his father, who's a plumber, and because the book job is a "plum" for a kid from the ghetto, Yakub will likely never be persuaded to give the job up and go to school—and so *he will never be able to read the books in his hands*.

I'm trying to sort through the pile of ironies that this situation presents. Yakub is holding up the biography of Steve Jobs, the Apple guru whose company has been accused of allowing substandard conditions to persist in its Chinese factories, permitting environmental waste to be dumped, and lying about using child employees. What would that mean to Yakub? If Jobs had employed Indian instead of Chinese workers, maybe Yakub would have an even better income.

That's of course assuming that Yakub should be working at all, a reality justifiably criticized by Westerners who care about children and how they're treated. Yet this is complicated by the fact that most of us aren't as hungry and desperate as Yakub and his neighbors are.

Perhaps Yakub would idolize Steve Jobs—especially if someone put an iPhone in his hands. Yet the myth that the world will all be connected soon is still a myth. Even if Yakub tries online games and all-the-rest-of-the-world in a Mumbai internet café, he will not be learning to read.

He is cut off: from the empowerment of education, middle-class opportunities, the hope of a job that sustains him, and the glories of reading.

Several organizations work on behalf of illiterate children, among them [Pratham](#). But Yakub lives among the largest illiterate population in the world (and even larger for women than for men). These nonprofits may never have the chance to reach him and try to persuade him to try a different route to adulthood.

Meanwhile he stands, frozen in my photo, frozen in the sweltering heat of Mumbai traffic, and with a frozen future.